

A dark, purple-lit hallway with a single flame hanging from the ceiling. The hallway is long and narrow, with doors on both sides. The floor is tiled, and there are some mats or papers scattered on it. The lighting is dim, with a strong purple glow from the ceiling lights. A single flame hangs from the ceiling in the center of the hallway, casting a warm glow. The text "black heart high" is written in a stylized, white, gothic font at the top of the image, and "dan holloway" is written in a similar font at the bottom.

black heart high

dan holloway

Black Heart High

Dan Holloway

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novels, all available for Kindle

The Company of Fellows (the bestselling dark
psychological thriller set in Oxford University)

Songs from the Other Side of the Wall

The Man Who Painted Agnieszka's Shoes

And the collection

(life:) razorblades included

Black Heart High is book 1 in the Black Heart
High Series of novellas

One

“There were three shots outside, a second’s gap between each. Crack. Then silence. Then crack, silence, crack. Like knocking. Like the devil announcing his presence at the gates of hell.”

The figure in the hoodie was leaning in, whispering so the ten or so kids in uniform gathered round had to bend their heads forward to catch the words, leaning a little closer with every whispered “crack”.

“Then smack. The sound of exploding glass, and she brushed the empty door frame aside with the barrel of her gun. Reloaded without slowing. Strode down the corridor, turning in one movement to enter a classroom. Crack. A silence. For a second, then two, that’s all but it felt like minutes before screams were everywhere, then crack. Reload, march from the classroom, down the corridor, picking another, sweeping in in one movement, and by now you could barely hear the gunshots over the growing screams, and still she didn’t stop, just kept on marching and reloading, and swooping into classrooms, shooting, leaving, marching, shooting, reloading, selecting, shooting, until she was at the end of the school and the whole building was aflame with screaming, and at the last door of the last class she kicked the wood in as she strode and reached a hand in her pocket, brought out a box of cartridges, stopped, framed in the doorway like a shadow backlit by a sobbing, shouting blaze of fear. Crack. No

silence, no delay, crack, reload, crack, crack, reload, until every last pupil was dead and the teacher trailed a slick of their blood to the floor where they'd cowered till the last bullet. And she walked, slow, through the dead, pushing all of them with the end of her gun to make sure they didn't move, and when she got to the wall, and she was certain every one of them was dead, she threw the rifle to the floor, took a handgun from her pocket, placed it to her temple, and screamed, so loud it carried over the roar the whole length of the school, screamed just one word, squeezed the trigger, and everything was silent."

"What did she say?"

"Spark. Just 'Spark'."

There was a moment when the small crowd was totally still, totally quiet, like they were sizing each other up to see who'd move first.

Then they all drew breath together, and one of the kids said, "No way."

"What do you mean 'No way'?" said another, "It was in the news."

"Yeah, why do you think they pulled down the school and built this place, dumbass?" said a third.

"Yeah, but not like that," said the first. "Not like some hero, some avenging angel. What does this freak know?"

"Yeah, good point," said the second.

"Why would someone do that?" said another.

All of a sudden there were ten kids crowded around, jostling, pointing, talking over each other, all saying the same thing, like someone messing with a sample: “What do you know?”

The figure took two steps back and turned their head to one side.

They moved in.

The figure stepped back again, lowered their head, lifted their hood, gripped a handful of long, raven black hair, and lifted it up.

Revealing the side of her head.

Revealing the scar in her temple.

Two

Fifteen months earlier

He didn't hear me scramble down the bank. He had his back to me and his headphones on, listening to old music no doubt. "Velvet Underground isn't old music," he told me once, "it's modern music written a long time ago." Whatever. To me it just seemed to be about drugs and self-harm, and I hated it, hated him listening to it as his body fell to pieces around him.

In the five minutes it took him to tag the crumbling wall, I finished two cigarettes and started a third. I walked up behind him when he'd finished, lifted one of his headphones and waited for him to turn round.

"Want one?" I asked, handing him a cigarette.

"Kayla!" A smile filled his face and his eyes lit up with the reflection of the cherry bud at the end of his cigarette as he drew, then smiled again, and threw his arms around me. I could feel bone beneath his hoodie and tried not to flinch. There was so little left of the boy I'd known when we met, three years earlier, a pair of thirteen year-olds hitting puberty and a new school together.

Kayla Flame, the skinny girl who kept her hood up and sat at the back and said nothing; Jack Hunt, the fat guy who always had his ears in 60s

music and his nose in a book from the same time. We sank fast through whatever kind of messed-up social hierarchy existed at Black Lane High till within weeks we were scrabbling around at the bottom, on our own except for the toecaps.

We made a simple pact. One night we were crouched against a corrugated iron wall, the light from our cigarettes jerking from adrenalin and nerves and tears. He said “Whatever else, we keep each other alive, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean it.”

“So do I,” I said, and I don’t know why but I grabbed my lighter, sparked it, held it between us, and reached for his hand. He didn’t resist as I held it open and moved his palm over the flame. He didn’t flinch and I pushed him away and held the lighter so close to my own hand the skin crackled and hissed.

I felt nothing.

We pressed our hands together and suddenly the pain was like someone peeling me with a knife and salting me like a side of bacon. I screamed and snatched my hand back, shaking it violently to cool it in the air.

When I looked at him he hadn’t moved. He smiled, and there was a single tear in one eye, and he said, “Safe, yeah?”

“Safe,” I said, staring at him, waiting for a sign he was hurting. But there wasn’t one. And he was still. Like the fear had drained away and he’d gone the weirdest sort of calm.

He took a can from his bag, and sprayed the iron wall with the outline of a flame.

“Our eternal flame,” I said. “And you’re the spark.”

And from that moment it was his tag, a lighter flame, and I started calling him Spark, and soon everyone who talked about him – no one talked *to* him – was calling him Spark as well.

How much had changed since then, I thought as I felt his ribs cut into me. I was still skinny but I must have weighed half as much again as he did. But I could still feel the tension in his body loosen just a bit as he leaned into me. Somehow we’d kept each other alive this far.

It was around ten when we headed back. It was spring and cloudy and in the orange light pollution we could see plenty well enough to walk on the towpath that skirted some of the swanky new riverside developments. We walked slowly, staring to the side, looking in at the lit rooms full of expensive furniture and paintings and all kinds of fancy gadgets. And absolutely no life or soul. It was like being at the zoo watching all those so-called normal people going about their so-called normal existences. They might as well have been animals their lives had so little to do with ours.

“What do you think they dream about?” I asked Spark.

“They don’t dream about anything. They’ve got nothing left to wish for. They’ve got where they’re going.”

“That’s sad,” I said.

“It’s more than sad. They might as well be dead. The moment you stand still you stop living.”

The one thing Spark and I never did was stand still and stop dreaming. It may have looked to the outside world like we spent our lives hanging around smoking and doing nothing but in our minds we had a hundred lives planned out, each of them different, each of them exciting, each of them just waiting for us to take the first step. Though for some reason we’d never taken that step.

I was thinking about one of those futures as we walked that night. I don’t know which one. One where Spark was happy, where there was food and no heroin and no pain. But that could have been any one of them.

I turned to look at him. He didn’t like me looking, he was too self-conscious because of all the weight he’d lost, and I tried not to. I guess I wanted to see if I could remember how he used to look when his long blonde hair was shiny and his eyes still had a fire in them, and put that old, happy Spark into my dream.

I looked.

And over his shoulder I saw them. No more than ten feet away. Five of them. Kids from

our year. Each one of them must have weighed as much as the two of us together.

Spark's eyes registered something was wrong with me but it was too late. Before I could move they broke into a run. I grabbed Spark's arm, but he didn't get what I was doing. "Run, dammit!" I shouted at him but he just looked at me.

Suddenly his eyes were huge, his mouth opened in surprise, and he crumpled to the floor and Tyler Cross was standing there, looking me right in the eye and laughing. His friends just stood there while he laughed, and then he started kicking Spark, again and again and Spark didn't move and didn't make a sound.

I wanted to shout at him to get away, wanted to cradle Spark, to tell him it was all OK, but it was like a curtain came down in my head. All of a sudden I couldn't think at all. I ran at Tyler, charging him like an animal.

His friends started laughing too, and I flailed my arms into his sides, but the blows had no strength. I felt Tyler's body convulse, but it wasn't pain. He was laughing at my efforts. I wanted to break his head clean off his shoulders to make him shut up, but I could feel his arms tightening around me.

Then I felt the first of the blows come down on my back. A second, on my neck. Boots jabbing at my legs. I threw my arms wildly to fend them off but there were too many of them.

“Spark!” I shouted. “Spark!” I kept shouting but it was coming out quieter and quieter each time. I was losing strength in my arms. My body was screaming from the steady rain of fists and feet.

And then there was nothing.

I tried to open my eyes but my head felt like it would split in two.

“What?” I managed to say, feebly.

“Sssh.” I felt a wind on my face.

“Spark?”

One by one bits of me started throbbing until my whole body was wrapped in pain.

“Sssh,” came the soft breeze again.

I fought the searing heat across my forehead, and slowly managed to force my eyelids open.

“Spark!”

He smiled, that gentle, soothing smile I knew so well, and then I saw his eyes, the tell-tale pinpoint pupils he got when he’d shot up. And it hit me harder than any of the other blows had done.

Three

I walked Spark back to his house, both of us taking slow, painful steps. We didn't talk. He'd seen the disappointment in my eyes. Spark had always tried to keep his using away from me. We were completely open about everything. He told me everything, didn't spare a single detail, because he knew it would have hurt me more if he'd kept things from me.

Sometimes he would look pale and go quiet and say "I must be getting home", and I'd know what he meant. But he'd only used when I was around a few times. I knew I hated that stuff, but I felt even worse that what I hated most wasn't how it was tearing him apart before my eyes. Or not just that. What I hated most was the way it made him happy like I couldn't.

So neither of us knew what to say. When we got to the door to the block of flats where he lived we put our arms round each other. I winced at the pain but jammed my lips together so I didn't whimper.

I have no idea what time I got in. My dad's car wasn't in the drive, and there was no sign he'd been home all day. When I got to my room I tried to lift my hoodie over my head but the pain was just too much. I thought about taking ibuprofen but I didn't. Watching Spark disintegrate in front of me had made me funny about painkillers or anything like that. I didn't want to need anything to take away the pain.

Which was stupid, because I knew I needed something. I needed him.

I couldn't sleep but I couldn't move either. It was midday by the time I'd dragged myself to school. I was still wearing clothes from the night before. I smoked a cigarette at the gate and skulked in. Everyone was in lessons and the place was empty.

Black Lane High was a single long, low building. Like an airport terminal with added graffiti and rotting roofs and crumbling brickwork. You could go in first thing in the morning and not see daylight again till late afternoon. I was out every second I could be. To smoke. To hang out with Spark. To find some rat run somewhere on the edge of the grounds or under the building where I could listen to music and not worry someone would come and find me and beat the crap out of me.

I wanted to get my exams. I wanted to get to college because I figured that was the only way I'd ever leave Black Lane behind and finally start my life. Spark and I had always planned to go to Art School. Goldsmith's or Central St Martin's. But it was a battle just to survive school let alone get ahead, and neither of us had rich relatives who gave a damn about our future, let alone anyone who'd pitch up and take us away to a place where we could achieve something.

So we hung around waiting for something to happen, talking about what it would be like if

we were out of there, knowing the chances of that happening were getting less and less every day.

I found Spark in the staff parking area, sitting in one of our places between the Deputy Head's Prius and Miss Steele, the Head of Science's, black SUV tank. You'd think a head of science would know – and *care* – about climate change. How did she expect us to respect her?

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.” He looked up. His eyes were normal. He was clean. But his face was a mess. “So what did your dad say?”

“No sign of him. What about your mum?”

“Didn't notice I'd come home. Probably didn't know I'd gone out. You just got here?”

“Yeah, you?”

“Nah, I was in first thing.” His voice was blank, and his shoulders slumped. He looked like he was still hurting inside as much as his body was aching.

“So what're you doing out here.”

He looked right at me, rolled up the sleeve of his hoodie and held his left arm out to me, palm up. There was a line of three fresh cigarette burns, still open and seeping liquid.

“Oh Spark,” I said. I took his hand and pulled it to my face. He clenched his fist. I opened out the fingers and pressed his palm to my lips. “Oh Spark, why?”

“I can’t do it, Kayla,” tears were forming in his eyes. He sat there, shaking his head and repeating, “I can’t do it.”

“You can,” I told him, stroking his hand. But I could see in his face it wasn’t true.

“It’s like.” He paused, held onto my hand, gripping it with whatever strength he had left. “It’s like I’m not made for this world, you know? Like I’m just not strong enough for it. Sometimes I feel like I’ve spent forever wandering and one day I got lost and stumbled into this world.” He squeezed tighter. “And you’re here to take me away from it. To take me home.”

“I wish I could do that,” I said. “I wish that more than anything in the world.”

“It was you,” he said.

“What was me?”

“This.” He looked down at his arm. “Tyler. He started going on in class about last night. They started laughing at you. You saved my life, Kayla, and he was laughing at you. I swear I wanted to kill him.”

“I know. That’s how I felt last night,” I said.

“But that’s not what we do, is it?”

“No,” I said, fighting back a rage that wanted to rip them open, to send them back to another world and leave this one for us.

“Is that because we’re weak?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “It’s because we’re better than they are.” And I wanted to believe it. I wanted to so much, but seeing his broken body,

seeing the tears flooding from his eyes, it was so hard.

“I love you, Kayla,” he said.

“I love you too.”

I took him in my arms. His body barely had any weight at all against me. I could feel him on my bruises less than I'd felt the mattress on my bed the night before. The tear that had been in the corner of his eye soon became a stream, and then a flood. As his body rocked against mine, I looked over his shoulder, in the mirror of the massive SUV. I looked at the decaying school just a few meters away, and it all seemed very simple.

The only chance Spark had, the only chance *we* had, was if this was the last we ever saw of that building.

Four

I held him and waited until his body was still. I put a hand on each shoulder, pushed him away so his face was a foot from mine, and said, very quietly, “You trust me, don’t you?”

“Course I do. Safe, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

There were decisions I had to make that I didn’t even know about, that would affect the rest of our lives, that would burn bridges, change our relationship, set us on the path to who knew what. It must have taken about five seconds to make every one of them. Isn’t that always the way with the best choices we make?

Take the four by four and everything in it and go on the run, or just disappear and have nothing, except a head start? There were fifteen minutes of lessons left. That was enough. I had the ignition off and the wires out in seconds.

“Call Scab,” I said. The second choice. We’d make it a few hours at the most before Spark started clucking. We were together for good now. Every moment. There was no place for prudishness or privacy. Not between us. I felt bile rising up my throat at the thought, but what was the choice? Go cold turkey on the run. Better to look after him however I could, and worry about getting him clean later. Somewhere else. Somewhere safe.

“Eh?”

“Get in and call Scab.”

“What?” His body was still going slow motion.

So I said it once more. Slowly. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course.”

“Then get in the car, call Scab, tell him to meet us by the river in 7 minutes. Tell him to bring eight bags, five thousand in dirty cash, scissors, two long sleeved shirts, and someone who can drive.”

I looked at Spark like I was asking him to pass the salt. He looked confused for a second, then he flashed me one of his enormous grins, took out his phone and made the call. There was a pause as he finished his lines and I heard him say “My mad as hell girlfriend just went into the motor dealing business.”

He hung up. There was a gentle purr as the engine clicked over. I made sure not to screech the tyres, drove out of the gates like it was the most normal thing in the world, and before the CCTV guy knew what the hell, we were gone.

I could feel my heart thumping against my chest. I’d had five lessons since my seventeenth birthday, and now we were fugitives. I needed to keep myself together for five minutes to get to Stevenson Bridge. That was all. It was the middle of the day and there was little traffic on the road, but it felt like every light could see me coming and turned itself red. I stared at shoppers struggling under bags of all kinds of

junk, willing them not to press the buttons at crossings. Let me through, goddammit, I scowled.

But they wouldn't, and each time I came clumsily to a stop, every time I crunched the gears as I started back up, I felt eyes on me. Everyone was watching us. They had to be. It was all going to end before it even started.

But somehow, every time I pulled away no police cars came screeching round the corner, I caught no one in the mirrors reaching for their phone and taking down our number plate. By the time I hit the small roads down to the river my neck was sore from turning, checking, making sure we weren't being followed, and my calf and my forearm were on fire from handling the gears.

It felt like forever but my watch had only moved on five minutes when I pulled up on Stevenson Bridge as parallel as I could manage. I closed my eyes and my forehead fell forward. My hands were shaking on the wheel, sending random pulses up my arm. My stomach was cramping and my skin was rapid-cycling hot and cold.

“That's it,” I said. “There's no going back now.”

“No going back is the only way to live,” said Spark.

I lifted my head and looked him straight in the eye. “Really?” I said. “Do you really believe that?” For some reason I had to know I wasn't doing this for nothing. I had to hear him

say it. More than that. I had to see that he meant it.

And he did.

“The only way,” he said, without hesitation, looking me right back, taking my hands, leaning in, and kissing me, just briefly, but with a power like he was sucking the life from me. Only he’d taken that a long time before. I was his. I had been for years. Maybe that wasn’t what he was doing at all. Maybe he was letting me know he was mine as well. Whatever. It was enough. It was enough to know I’d done right, that whatever happened from that moment on, there was nothing to regret.

His hands gripped tighter. He felt so strong. He kissed me again like he was breathing his strength into me.

“Thank you,” I mouthed as I pulled away.

Smack.

And again.

What the hell?

Again. The window.

Spark smiled.

I turned to see what he was looking at, and let out a cry. At the window was a face staring right at me that looked like it had come straight out of my nightmares. As pale as the surface of the moon, and as cratered, with eyes utterly devoid of expression and a mouth that was half open and leering.

Not the police, I thought. A hundred times worse than that. What the hell had I gotten us into?

I found the button that worked the window.

“Scab?” I said, as full of bravado as I could manage, trying to stop my voice shaking like my hands.

“Well hey, sweetness.”

“This is Kayla,” said Spark.

“Well I didn’t think she was Katie Price, yeah.”

“Hey,” I said, giving up on sounding cool, just trying to keep my cool.

Which I lost. The moment Scab lifted his hand and I saw the blade glinting in the open window, about a foot from my face.

“So what you got for me, sweetness?”

My lips were jammed solid. Suddenly I felt so small, realised how far out of my comfort zone I was, how deep I’d gotten us in, and I wanted out. I wanted to open the door and run and curl up in bed and sleep and wake up and start today again. My hands made for the handle.

And then, as though he sensed I was about to give in and found the strength I’d lost, I heard Spark’s voice.

“Choo got for us, man? Got the gear, yeah?”

“Yeah, man.” With the hand holding the knife, Scab patted his chest.

“Got the notes? The other stuff?”

Scab lifted his other hand. It held an Adidas vinyl bag. It bulged at the sides. He didn't open it.

“Show me man,” said Spark.

Suddenly the eyes weren't so expressionless. A rage skidded across them like a cloud in front of the sun. The sentences came fast. Not questions. Not statements. Commands. He raised the knife as he spoke, waving it inside the window. “Stop messing with me, man, and show me what you got. What you doing bringing her here? What's happening, man? You show me.”

I looked to Scab. I don't know if he saw the fear in my eyes. He wasn't looking at me. He spread his hands and said, “This is what we got. Wheels. Good as new. One careful driver. And Kayla, yeah.”

Scab lowered the knife. He nodded, slowly. He looked impressed.

“Let's see the money, man,” said Spark, pushing his advantage home.

“I got two k, man. Near on.”

It wasn't enough. Spark hesitated. It would have to do.

“OK, let's see.”

Scab started to raise the bag. Then he frowned. Like a thought was trying to work its way into his addled head.

“Two grand and a few bags for these wheels, man. You must be in a hurry.”

Here we go, I thought. But Spark didn't flinch.

“I’m taking my girl somewhere special, yeah.” I tried not to wince when he called me his girl like I was some piece of meat, tried to not to kick out at the innuendo. I knew it was an act. A good one.

“Yeah?” Scab nodded his head, looking me up and down and smiling and nodding again. His disgusting gaze felt like slime all over my skin.

“Yeah,” said Spark, not missing a beat.

Scab lifted the bag all the way, held it in the window. “I’ll put it in your sweet little lap, precious. Let you run those sweet little fingers over it.” He was smiling at me. Or rather he was smiling at somewhere between my legs. I clenched my teeth. I tried not to think of the hand lowering the bag down through the window. And then I tried not to bite it off when he brushed against my chest. Tried not to bite his face off when he grinned. The other hand came in. Still holding the knife. He made a show of turning the knife away from me. An excuse to brush that hand against my other breast. I made myself not grab the knife from his hand and slash his eyes out.

He unzipped the bag and opened it wide enough to see the contents. Two pink-grey shirts that may or may not have been washed in the last year, a pair of safety scissors, and notes. A couple of red flashes of fifties, crumpled purple of 20s. Not two grand. Nowhere near. But all we were going to get, so it would have to be enough.

Scab withdrew the bag, rubbing me as he went, not even trying to hide it. He held his hand out to the side and motioned behind him. A second figure appeared, hollow-cheeked and blank-eyed like Scab.

“Get out,” Scab barked at us.

Spark opened his door and swung out. I tried to do likewise. Scab and his friend were exchanging looks and leering back at me as I got out. His friend took two steps forward. I backed against the car. It was the only bargaining tool we had.

For the few seconds it took Spark to get round my side of the car I was alone and exposed, a little girl lost in a forest after dark. It scared me just how much I relied on him. It scared me even more that one day he might not be there. That was why I was doing this. I felt the doubt leave my body.

“The gear and the bag,” I said, finding my voice.

“Well aren’t you the gangster!” The two of them laughed together.

“The gear and the bag, and we’re done,” I said again.

Scab pocketed his knife. His friend stepped forward again. I could almost feel his breath on me and it made me nauseous. Scab reached inside his jacket, and took out a screwed-up carrier bag. He handed it to me. I opened it. I had no idea what I was looking for but I saw the packets inside and tried to look like I knew my

way around. I handed the bag to Spark and held out my hand. His friend grabbed the handle of the door. I grabbed the bag. Scab turned his back, I heard the engine kick in, Scab dived into a car across the bridge, tyres screeched, more tyres screeched behind me, I jumped out of the way, and they were gone.

I looked at Spark.

“How could you?” I said. “How could you know that beast?”

“Don’t,” he said. So softly I wanted to cry.

“OK,” I said. And I knew the conversation was over. I also knew that part of both our lives was over. The rest of our lives started now. I just hoped in his case there was plenty of life left.

Five

We sat together under Stevenson Bridge smoking and picking gravel off the path, throwing it into the brown, stinking water.

“So this is what day one of the rest of your life feels like,” said Spark.

“Damn right.”

“It feels good,” he said, flicking the still-burning end of his cigarette into the river. It hissed, and he took my hand and said, “I’ve got everything I need.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I could see the dreams behind his eyes as he looked over the water. I loved his idealism. I loved the way however low he was he never stopped thinking of a better future. For himself. For us. Even for the world itself, dammit, however crappy it had treated him over the years. He had so many dreams over the years that had come to nothing, but it didn’t stop him. “It only has to work out once,” he’d say. I knew it wasn’t that simple, but I loved that he thought it was.

Only now it was simple. Today was different from every day that had gone before.

Today was the day we stopped planning and started living. And kept on going, wherever life took us. And for as long as life kept faith with us, we’d keep faith with life. It was that simple.

“So first off we make us a little harder to spot.”

“Kayla, the world has never noticed we’re here,” said Spark. “Now’s no different.”

“Well Miss Steele might feel now’s different.”

Spark smiled. Then he laughed. And he laughed some more, and for a minute or so we leaned on each other laughing our hearts out. My head was light. My muscles were pumping all on their own.

“I did all right, didn’t I?” I said.

“You did amazing,” said Spark. “You’re on fire.”

Then I realised what I’d forgotten. “No paint,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Spark, “well now I’ve got you tagged in here.” He placed his hand on my chest, over my heart. A warmth started to flow outwards from where he was touching me. I heard a sigh leave my lips. I felt like I was going to burn up under him. I wanted to close my eyes. I wanted to forget everything but him touching me. But I couldn’t. Not yet. Not till we were clear of this place.

“So this is what we do first,” I said, taking off my hoodie.

“Shouldn’t we get out of here first!”

“Shut up and take yours off,” I said, laughing. He lifted his grey hoodie over his head and I tried not to look at the marks on his skin. Tried to look only at him, at the beautiful soul behind the broken body. Tried to remind myself that was why I was doing this, to mend his body,

that the marks were temporary but the boy inside was eternal.

“OK, let’s have it,” I said.

I took the packets of junk out of the carrier Scab had brought them in, stuffed them in my pocket and replaced them with our hoodies. I scooped up gravel from the path, as many bigger stones as I could find lying around and put them in the bag too, tied it off at the handle and hurled it into the river. The handles stuck up like drowning hands waving for help for a few seconds and then they were gone.

I took the shirts from the bag, handed one to Spark and put on the other. They were way too big, and pale blue, like something you’d put on a baby. But they’d do for now. Then I took out the scissors.

“Salon style in your own home,” I said, grabbing a handful of my hair and hacking as best I could with the blunt blades. I threw each tuft into the river as I went and ran my hand over my head. It felt liked a ploughed field, but I guessed it was different from how it looked before. “Now you.”

“No way,” he said, grabbing the scissors from me. And with a few cuts in little more than a minute he looked almost passable.

“Nice! You should apply for a job in a bank or something.”

“You shouldn’t apply for a job as a hairdresser,” he said.

“New clothes when we get to London,” I said.

He looked me up and down and said “Let’s get going then,” and started walking up the ramp to the road.

I pulled him back.

“You’re sure?” I said.

“Of course I’m sure.”

“No, that’s not what I mean.” I shifted uneasily from foot to foot. I knew I had to make myself talk to him about it, had to admit to myself what the ground rules were, but I had to summon up every bit of strength I had to do it. “I mean the coach to London takes two hours. It’s half an hour to the station. Will you need?” I closed my eyes, swallowed. “Will you be able to manage without any gear?”

Spark smiled at me. “Come on,” he said, taking my hand and racing up to the road. “Right now you’ve got me high enough on adrenalin to last all day.”

But I hadn’t of course.

The moment we sat down on the coach, he closed his eyes, rested his head on the window, and he was asleep.

Over his shoulder, I watched the shops turn to houses and the houses to flats as we left town, and the flats became lay-bys and service areas and eventually grass, and the road became motorway, and each mile our old life was further away. As the motorway cut through hills, I

watched birds of prey hovering over fields, watching for food, their wings beating relentlessly and their eyes taking everything in, and I wondered if we'd stopped being the prey and become the hunters, soaring above life, missing nothing, occasionally swooping in for a kill.

I watched Spark sleep and thought about closing my eyes as well. I knew I'd need my reserves. I knew I should sleep every spare moment. But I couldn't. I was too excited. This was more than a rescue mission now. I'd almost forgotten how ill Spark was altogether. In my mind this was an adventure and I didn't want to miss a second. Nor did I want to relax my hold on the bag that contained everything we now owned in the whole world.

The miles to London counted down and down and soon the fields became flats and the flats became houses and the houses became shops and hotels until we were skirting Hyde Park.

I nudged Spark. He opened his eyes sleepily.

"We're here," I said.

He smiled. I could see a thin film of sweat on his forehead. His skin was grey.

We stood on the corner of Oxford Street. Spark's sweating was getting worse. I told him to go and do whatever he had to do and he disappeared into KFC without saying anything.

I stayed there, in the mid afternoon sun, clutching the bag, people brushing against me either side like I wasn't there. I closed my eyes and felt the jostle of the crowd. That's what I loved about the city. The ability to lose yourself completely without ever being alone.

"It's been the same for hundreds of years you know," I heard in my ear. Spark's voice was relaxed and full of life. He'd been and shot up. I told myself not to think about it.

"We're part of the world's oldest urban legend," I replied.

"Streets paved with gold."

"You think it makes us as dumb as everyone else who comes here looking for a future only to get sucked under?"

"Who says they were dumb?"

"Thinking you're different? That the rules don't apply to you. Isn't that the dumbest thing of all?"

"We are different," said Spark.

"You think everyone who ends up homeless in some doorway selling themselves for a fix doesn't think exactly the same?"

"Just because they all thought it doesn't mean we aren't different," he said.

I loved his belief in us, and fuelled by the drugs or not, it was just what I needed to hear.

"You know," I said. "We look ridiculous in these shirts. And we should ditch the bag."

Spark reached over, unzipped the bag, put his hand in, brought it back out holding a note

and spun round, darting into the crowd. I lost sight of him for a moment then he reappeared, grinning, holding up both hands. In one he held a shiny vinyl black bag with I love London scrawled on it in loopy red handwriting. In the other hand he had a black plastic wallet and pencil case to match.

“That’s one problem down,” he said.

“Great,” I said. “So now we’re tourists.”

“Well, aren’t we?”

I looked at the shops down Oxford Street. “OK, but I’m not getting clothes from Primark,” I said.

“Duh, there’s only one place to go for clothes.”

Fifteen minutes later Scab’s Adidas bag was in a bin by Marble Arch and we emerged onto Camden High Street.

“Whoa!” I said. As far as I could see were shops with stands outside displaying studs and boots and belts and leather and lace and velvet and tattoos and God knows what. They had narrow doorways and unlit steps down to basements, and above every door was some kind of crazy paper maché sculpture of some kind of weird hippy goth symbol. In the doorways were people with piercings to die for and made-up faces that looked they’d died and been reborn. Everywhere I looked hair was waxed, sprayed, dyed or braided, hands were gloved and feet were platformed and bodies were bound in layers of

laced-up leather and garish T-shirts splattered with images from middle-class nightmares.

“So this is what home feels like,” I whispered to myself.

“You’ve never been here?”

“It was always on my things to do before I die list,” I said.

“I have one of those too,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. We should compare one day.”

“Or sooner.”

“I love that about you,” said Spark.

“What?”

“That when you think of something you want to do it right away. And that you’re not afraid to think about dying.”

“Being afraid of it won’t stop it happening,” I said. The truth was I was terrified of death. Most of all I was terrified of his death, and of my life without him. But talking made the fear bearable.

“Too many people think talking about death stops you making the most of life. They think people like us dwell on it, that we’re already half way to the grave when the opposite’s true. Thinking about death is the only thing that makes you realise how precious life is. People who never think about death wake up one day and realise they never got round to choosing how to live.”

“And how have you chosen to live?” I asked. I regretted it the moment I said it. I didn’t want him to think I was judging him.

“I’ve made three choices about my life,” he said, without any shadow passing across his face.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. One day at a time. Any way I can manage. And with you.”

I felt a warmth and a rush, and I didn’t know if it was Spark or the sun, or Camden or the thought of a future. “Let’s get clothes,” I said.

Six

We turned right out of the station. I stopped at every display stand outside every shop. I wanted everything I saw, but Spark kept telling me to wait and pulling me on. We took a turn into the artificial alleys of Camden Market. I picked up two badly printed bootleg Nico T-shirts. Spark chose a black Ramones shirt and a fake Paramore one from the same stall and beat the owner down to £25 for the four.

We crossed Camden Lock. The smells of dirty water and weed and weird drinks made from herbs and fruit I'd never heard of mingled and made my head spin slightly. By the side of the canal people were laid out smoking and talking and listening to music on their iPods. Couples, male and female, male and male, female and female, indeterminate and indeterminate, walked hand in hand or lay lazily on top of each other, kissing in between drawing on spliffs and sipping God knows what from plastic bottles with no labels. Not one of them looked like anyone from Black Lane High.

“Say goodbye to the sun,” said Spark as we crossed the road and under a painted sign saying Camden Lock Market that looked like something off the side of a boat.

The first thing to hit me was the smell of food, and suddenly I realised just how long it had been since I'd eaten. “Try some,” called people from either side of the makeshift alleys, holding

out Styrofoam bowls full of noodles and sweet and sour, cous cous, fajitas and curry.

“I’m starving,” I said to Spark.

“Me too,” he said unexpectedly. He smiled. “It’s OK, I do *get* hungry.”

“Only when things are going well,” I said.

“Well they are.”

We ordered two tubs of mixed noodles with tofu curry sauce poured over the top, and sat on the end of a wooden bench at a wooden table in the middle of what looked like the communal eating area. I could just about see a pocket of sky above. It felt like some shanty town market you’d see on a documentary.

Next to me was a guy in skinnies with a black vest and a ring through his nose, writing something in a notebook in tiny handwriting so fast I could barely see his fingers move. The hand that wasn’t writing was stuffing rice into his mouth. Next to Spark was a woman in a Slipknot T-shirt with Celtic knot tattoos up both her arms and long black hair with purple highlights, smoking a joint and picking at a tub of the same rice. She was watching the guy write. She must have been ten or twenty years older than him but the way she looked at him, more affectionate than curious, I wondered if she was an admiring stranger or a partner.

Usually that close to other people I’d want to run and cram myself into a corner somewhere, but I didn’t feel any of the anxiety or nausea I’d expect. I finished my noodles and lit a

cigarette and leaned back. I checked my watch. It was 5 o'clock. Twelve hours ago I'd been curled up in bed in agony and tears. Now it felt that was a different life altogether. In fact I realised for the first time I couldn't even feel my bruises. I hadn't done since I made the decision to run.

The woman took another draw from her joint and held it over the table towards me. She smiled. Lines carved into her face. I thought she looked ancient, older than the parents of most people my age, but she still looked cool.

I took it from her, inhaled and passed it back. "Sal," she said, passing it to Spark.

We hadn't planned for this. I've no idea why not, it was the first thing we should have done. Come up with a cover story.

"Spark," he said. He shot me a look that said it's OK, no one's looking for us here. And I guess he was right. The people here weren't interested in what the police back home wanted to speak to us about. If anyone was interested at all.

"Kayla," I said.

"This is JB," said Sal, pointing to the guy who was still writing.

"Which stands for?" asked Spark.

"Which stands for the fact his brain's so shot he forgot his real name." Sal laughed, and we laughed with her. "Haven't seen you before."

"We haven't been here before," I said.

"So what you doing?"

“Looking for clothes,” I said, casting a disapproving look at the baby blue thing Scab had left me wearing.

“Nice,” she said. She gave us the once over, checking us over to see if a new set of clothes could salvage any kind of cool. I doubted it. “So happens a friend has a store here.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She threw the dead roach on the floor and looked me straight in the eyes, just for a moment. I felt a jolt like she’d turned a switch inside my soul. Then she melted back into a smile and I wondered if I’d imagined it. “It’s just perfect for you.”

She shot a look at Spark. A different look. One I’d say was more like sympathy.

“Come on,” she said. “I’ll introduce you to Shell.”

“Shell as in Michelle?” asked Spark.

“Shell as in conch shell,” said Sal.

Once we left the eating area the daylight disappeared altogether. The smells intensified. Spices, leather, dust, incense, oils, tobacco and weed. It felt like a shadow world, a twilight rat run that existed underneath the outside world, full of strange creatures and magical things that only surfaced after dark, if at all.

Sal stopped outside a wooden booth. The shop front, if that’s what it was, can’t have been more than five feet across, and barely two feet of that was accessible past rails of long, broad leather coats and racks of high black and metal

boots. Above the tiny entrance was a black sign with spidery silver writing declaring that this was *Forgotten and Alone*. I could barely see inside. There was a tunnel of almost darkness, but I could make out just enough shimmer and shine from strange vinyl shapes and metal contortions that it felt like I was being physically sucked inside.

A figure came out of the near-black. She must have been over six feet tall, and dressed from head to toe in layered black lace. Her hair was straight and fell down to her waist like a black bridal veil, and underneath her skin was porcelain white with tar black lips, and pentacle studs in gun metal through her eyebrows.

I heard Spark gasp, and was pretty sure I must have done too.

“Hey, Shell, these guys are new and looking for clothes,” said Sal.

Shell’s jet black lips opened into an enormous smile. “Clothes is what I do.”

Shell motioned for me to follow and when I did I gasped again, and I heard Sal’s voice behind me, “You see, I told you. You belong here.”

Ten minutes later we each had black coats that dusted the floor, two pairs of black canvas trousers trussed up with zips and buckles, and black leather boots with steel toecaps in the shape of death’s head moths and steel pentacles crawling up spiderwebs on the calves.

We put on the coats and boots, tied our trainers round our waists by the laces, and I folded everything else into the I Love London bag which bulged till it was almost round. “You need another bag as well?” asked Shell.

“No,” I said. “Spark bought it for me.”

Shell looked at me in that warm kind of way that mothers are supposed to but mine never did. Not that she was old enough to be my mother. She looked barely older than me under all the make-up.

“So what are your plans?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Spark. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Well that’s perfect. We’re out of here in ten minutes for a gig at the best place in town. Come over with us.”

The sun was still way above the horizon as we threaded our way through the back streets of Camden and Kentish Town. People seemed to be going about their lives at half speed, like they were slowing down time to stretch the summer evening out forever.

We didn’t talk much but nothing felt awkward. Occasionally I felt a weird sense of disorientation. We’d come here to get away from people, to be alone. And here we were heading to a party with the first people we’d met. But the feeling soon went away as I enjoyed the warmth and felt the exhilaration of entering a new world.

JB walked a few paces behind the rest of us. I'd still not heard him talk, and most of the time I forgot he was there. After a while Spark fell back and walked beside him. JB didn't seem to notice. I looked over my shoulder occasionally and saw them, side by side but each in their own little world.

"So what are you writing?" I heard Spark ask eventually.

"Stuff." The voice was thin and split like it was never used. Sal raised an eyebrow. I guessed that was the first thing he'd said in a while.

"Kind of stuff?"

"Stuff I remember."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I think so." The words were slow, deliberate, separate. Like he was thinking about each one, or thinking about how to speak at all.

"Stuff about a girl?"

"She dead?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry, man."

"Yeah."

And that was it. I turned around and they each had their head down looking at the square foot in front of their shoes.

"That's quite a gift," said Shell.

"He doesn't say much but he always says the right thing," I said. "It's like he's got some kind of antenna in his head."

"He's lucky to have you."

“I’m lucky to have him, you mean.”

“Maybe you are, but he’s sure as hell lucky to have you.”

I had that same feeling I’d had from Sal when we were eating. It only lasted a moment but it was definitely there. The feeling that someone was peeling back my skin and looking inside me and there was nothing I could do about it. “How do you figure that?”

“You do Religious Studies at school?” asked Sal, cutting in.

“I guess.”

“Any of it go in?”

“I doubt it.”

Sal and Shell laughed.

“There’s a story in the New Testament,” Sal went on. “Jesus goes to stay with two women. You know who Jesus is, right?”

I stuck my tongue out at her.

“Well, it was just before he was heading up to town to get crucified, and he was with these two women and one of them went flapping around the house to make things right for their honoured guest and the other one just sat there and listened and washed his feet.”

“Cleaning his body ready for death,” said Shell.

“You get it?” asked Sal.

“No,” I said. It was the kind of conversation I was always having with Spark. The kind that when it started I wished I’d paid more attention in class, and by the time it

finished I was glad I ignored classes and hung out with Spark.

“You know he’s dying, don’t you?” said Sal, out of nowhere.

“Fuck you!” I speeded up. I needed to get clear of them. I needed them to shut up. I needed those words to get out of my head. I grabbed my iPod from my pocket, jammed the earphones in, turned up a track by Blood Red Shoes, and marched ahead, not knowing where I was going.

A hand clamped my shoulder. I tried to shrug it off but it was too strong. I turned round. Shell put her other hand on my other shoulder. I could feel this incredible strength in her grip, but it was gentle at the same time.

I could see her mouthing at me. “Are we OK?” she was saying. I turned my head away. Like a petulant schoolgirl. Which I was. Which I couldn’t afford to be. I needed to act grown up if we were going to make it and I figured a grown up would look back and let her speak. I took my earphones out.

“He’s dying, Kayla.” Her voice was soft.

“He’s not.”

“I’m sorry. You know he is. If you look down inside yourself, and I wouldn’t blame you if you haven’t done that. But you need to understand. That’s what makes this so special. He’s dying, and you’re cleaning his body ready for death.”

I could feel my lip shaking. I mustn't cry. Spark couldn't be far behind and he mustn't see me crying.

"Let's walk," I said.

She let go my shoulders and I let her walk beside me. I didn't look round or to the side, or raise a hand to wipe my face in case he saw.

"I can't get him clean," I said. "I've tried and I've tried but I can't do it."

"Not that kind of clean!" She laughed.

"I'd give anything to wash away the hurt," I said.

"You haven't given anything."

"But."

"You haven't given anything. You've given everything," she said.

"You're freaking me out."

"Come on, let's go and listen to some music." Shell put her arm round my shoulder. I felt my knees buckle for a moment under the weight. She was like a person only scaled up.

"What were you listening to?"

"Blood Red Shoes."

"Nice."

Seven

I recognised the silver font I'd seen at the shop in Camden Lock Market. *Forgotten and Alone* it said, just the same, only this time the words were riveted onto railings at the top of a concrete staircase at the front of a regular-looking red brick house. It led down to a few cracked and dirty paving slabs outside a door that looked like it had been fly-posted with Gothic and modern scripts copied on the cheap onto brightly-coloured paper most of which had faded unevenly, forming a patchwork history of every gig since the house was built.

I could hear a bass thump thumping up onto the street but it sounded like it was coming from a long way away.

"So what's with the name?" I asked Sal as we waited for JB and Spark to catch up.

"It's what we all are, isn't it?"

"It feels like it most of the time."

When he arrived, I watched Spark eye the stairs and the drab stones in the makeshift courtyard, and I knew what he was thinking.

"Hey, JB," he said. "You know where I can get paint?"

"Paint?"

"You know, spray cans, yeah?"

"Yeah." For the first time I thought I saw an expression on JB's face, like a smile had flashed behind his eyes. "Look, no worries, I can get you paint. What do you need?"

"Red, orange, yellow, white."

“Later,” said JB, turning on his heels and heading off.

“Say goodbye to the sun,” said Sal, grinning as she held the door open, and I remembered Spark saying the exact same thing to me just a few hours earlier. There was something not quite right about Sal, what she said, the way she looked at me sometimes, the way she made me feel like she could see right inside me, something not quite right about the whole situation in fact.

Only.

Only the whole thing felt exactly right.

The moment I was through the door the bass got louder and it was joined by a weird mix of strings and guitars and screaming and cries that were almost words but not quite. It was loud enough to fill your head and drown every evil, intrusive thought; loud enough you didn't have to talk if you didn't want to, not so loud you couldn't.

I could have sworn the red lights and the dark paint on the walls and floor and the red draped fabric everywhere were pulsing with the beat, making it feel even more like I was inside some big black heart. It was impossible to tell how big the room was. It can't have been more than a regular basement but the blackness and the music made it impossible to tell where floors became walls, and the few people I could see, make-up on faces glistening out of the darkness of laced-up leather and velvet and ripped black

cotton, were just floating heads that meant I had no sense of perspective.

“So what is this place?” asked Spark.

“It’s home,” said Shell.

“It feels like I’ve landed back in some tripped out kind of womb. No wonder I turned out a junkie.”

“It feels like the inside of a coffin,” I said.

“Birth and death and the circle of life and other movie clichés,” said Spark.

“This is any place you want it to be,” said Shell. “That’s what home is.”

I looked around. There must have been twenty people there, maybe a few more. Everyone seemed comfortable in their own space, a bit like JB, but there were only one or two pairs, no groups. People weren’t talking. They weren’t mixing. They just *were*. We were the exception. I felt all of a sudden like we’d crashed, like we’d overstayed our welcome.

As though she’d read my mind, Sal said, “It’s OK. Most people just hang. Sometimes they talk. Most of the time most of the people keep themselves to themselves, but we talk.”

“Not JB,” said Shell. “He just hangs with us, but it’s all good.”

“Whatever you want it to be,” said Spark.

“Exactly.”

Shell fetched a four pack of Relentless from what looked like a chest freezer and handed us one each. “To Spark and Kayla,” she said.

“To Sal and Shell and JB,” said Spark,
lifting his can and taking a slurp.

“Welcome to the world of the forgotten
and alone!”

“We’ve been there for years,” I said.

Eight

Time passed in some strange way that was impossible to measure. The music wasn't divided into songs. It was just a relentless series of bass beats and chanting that came and went from the music without any real kind of pattern. And with no light, and conversation that moved around like some kind of insect, I couldn't say how long it was till JB reappeared with a screwed up carrier bag.

He sauntered over to Spark and handed him the bag. "Paint," he said.

"Thanks, man," said Spark. "What do I owe you?"

"A turn." JB looked him in the eye, just for a moment, then looked back at the floor.

"Tagging?"

"Yeah."

"Done."

I could feel the flow of energy between them. It was the most alive I'd seen Spark for more than a year. It's starting to work, I thought.

I looked back and forth between Sal and Shell who must've been thinking the same as me, and said, "So come on then."

It had gotten dark since we'd been inside, only it was a strange kind of dark that was more like a dirty orange grey. Like we were in a photo that was covered in dust. Spark had the carrier bag in one hand and took mine in the other. I squeezed and he squeezed back, with a strength I hadn't felt in ages.

“The city’s our canvas,” said Shell.

“Life’s our canvas,” said Spark.

A look went across Shell’s face, just for a second, like she was going to cry. “You really think that?” she said with a hesitancy in her voice.

“Of course. I don’t paint to leave my art behind. I paint because that is my art. The art is the doing. The art is taking what’s beautiful in your heart and plastering it over everything that’s damaged and dirty in the world.”

“And what if the things in your heart aren’t beautiful?” said Sal.

“Then you’ve got a choice,” he said. “You can leave them in there and let yourself rot slowly from the inside. Or you can try and beat them till they bleed and die. Or you can spend your life so busy doing other stuff there’s no time to remember they’re there.”

“Are there things in your heart that aren’t beautiful?”

I felt my hand crushed under his grip. I could feel the sweat starting to flow from his palm.

He shrugged.

“So what did you choose?”

“I chose all three,” he said. Which was the truth. Which explained why his body was so close to breaking. Beaten up from the inside, beaten up from the outside, and never given a moment’s rest. What chance did he stand? “What about you? What ugly things are swimming around in there?”

“Who says I have a heart?” said Sal.

He laughed and looked at Shell.

“Been so long since I looked that I’ve long forgotten,” she said.

“What I lost,” said JB, quietly, without being asked. “That’s all any of us here have. What we lost. Sometimes it’s beautiful and sometimes it’s the ugliest thing in the world.”

The three of them were looking at Spark and he said, “Sorry if I touched a nerve,” but they weren’t looking at him like they were upset. Then they all looked at me and all I could see in their eyes was pity.

“We need something to drink,” said Sal.

Shell pulled a can of Relentless from out of one of her layers of clothing. She pulled the ring and Sal said, “And we need something to drink to.”

“To what we lost,” said Spark. I watched their faces and for a moment I thought every one of them was about to cry then Shell piped up, “To beauty!”

“To beauty!” we all said together and the sense of sadness lifted and even the sky seemed a less foggy orange-grey, and we passed the can round till it was finished and did the same with a joint.

Spark took the can of white paint from the carrier bag and tagged the road where we stood with a flame. He offered the bag to JB who took out the red can and shook it. “Like this,” said Spark, placing JB’s index finger on the nozzle

and loosening the rest of his grip, and JB sprayed *to beauty* in awkward lower case letters next to the flame.

We stood there in the middle of the road looking at it like we were looking into a real fire. I could almost see shapes in it like when I was young and used to stay at my gran's house and she'd say things like "If you look really hard you can see the spirit of the woods dancing in the flames." Only I never could see the spirit of the woods dancing in the flames, but right then I'm pretty sure I could have done, and I half expected Spark to start telling us all ghost stories.

It was like the rest of the world had disappeared altogether. Until a car horn blasted behind us and someone screamed "bloody hooligans" and we ran to the pavement and laughed as he drove past us in his black shiny whatever giving us the finger.

"You see?" said Spark, walking two steps in front of us. "The art isn't the marks on the road. The art's the fact we made them. The art's how we made them. The art's why we made them."

"Quite a speaker, isn't he?" said Sal.

"Yeah, he is."

"You know what you say is most impressive when it's backed up with what you do."

"He does," I said. "Whenever he can, he does. Things like this. Spontaneous things."

“Is that really doing something? Don’t get me wrong, I haven’t had fun like this in years but when it comes down to it, what would he do?”

“He’d do anything for me. He’d give his life for me if he had to.”

“I don’t doubt that for a minute. But what would he do to save his own life?”

I looked at her, and I thought, and I smiled and said, “Rely on me.”

She threaded her hand through my arm and pulled me to her side affectionately and we carried on walking and soon the laughter and the exhilaration returned and the walls and pavements and streets in the maze around the *Forgotten and Alone* club were glowing as orange from the light of painted flames as the sky from the streetlamps.

When we headed back into the basement I’d lost track of time completely and all I knew was the sun wasn’t up yet. The same people we’d left were still there, sitting and standing in pretty much the same places as far as I could remember.

“You have any place to stay?” asked Shell. I.

“No,” I said. I hadn’t thought about it. I still wasn’t feeling tired. Not in the slightest. And the idea of sleep itself seemed strange. I put it down to all the Relentless. But I knew Spark must be exhausted. And when the adrenalin of today wore off I knew he’d need to sleep for as long as his body would let him.

“We’ve got a flat above this place. There’s a spare room.”

I didn’t know what to say. We’d run away to get away from people. But these people didn’t appear to be part of our problems. Which was a first. Spark was heading our way from the toilet. I knew what he’d been doing. His eyes were almost closed from exhaustion. I didn’t know if he’d even make it upstairs. I knew he wouldn’t make it any further.

“Thanks,” I said.

Nine

I guess it was like any other flat, only I had no idea what any other flat looked like. I could only remember living with my dad in a house that would have been too big for the two of us even if he'd spent all his time there, which he didn't. Our house was full of beige carpets and pale wood and cream curtains and the space and lack of any kind of colour gave me almost permanent white-out whenever I left my room. So I tended not to.

The flat had a small kitchen straight off the door that looked so clean I was sure it was never really used. We went right through without stopping into what I guessed was some kind of communal room. Three walls were painted black and the fourth was papered with gig posters. There was little in the way of decoration on the walls. A TV set that was almost the size of a cinema screen. And a painting. Or a canvas at any rate. About a foot square. Painted as black as the walls, with writing on it in a red so bright it was like the canvas was on fire.

There was no furniture to speak of, but I couldn't really see the floor. That was hidden somewhere under piles of purple, black, red and peacock blue cushions and throws and rugs and drapes, and where there wasn't some kind of fabric or other there were books. Old hardbacks with linen bindings and gold writing on the spine. And graphic novels. And pamphlets some of which looked like poetry and some of which looked like comics. The kind of books my dad

never had. And up against the wall were three guitars, black and beaten up and covered in stickers. An acoustic, an electric and a bass.

“I’ll show you your room,” said Shell.

But I wasn’t tired. Couldn’t imagine sleeping. I knew my body was doing weird things. It had to be screaming for sleep after the day we’d had. After the previous night. But my bruises still weren’t aching and my body was refusing to feel tired.

“Who are they?” asked Spark, standing in front of the canvas with his nose pressed against it.

“They’re the ones who aren’t forgotten,” said Sal.

Spark nodded. Slowly. Like her words hadn’t gone in. Like his body had just seized up where it stood. Even if I didn’t, I knew he needed rest more than ever. And I wanted to be holding him when he fell asleep.

“Thanks,” I said to Shell, casting a look over my shoulder at Sal.

“It’ll be a long time before I turn in,” she said, which is what I wanted to hear.

Shell left us in a room that was small but clean. There was enough room for a double bed but little else except a narrow table you had to sit on the edge of the bed to get to that had a desk underneath, and a few shelves. The room had wallpaper that looked like a black and gold and purple splatter painting, and there was a Nightwish poster over the bed.

“Thank you so much,” I said to Shell. Spark lay down on the bed, twitched a couple of times like he was getting comfortable, and looked like he was already asleep.

“You’re welcome,” she said. “You fit right in here.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, it feels like we do.”

She gave me one of those looks, the mix of pity and being in on some kind of secret, and closed the door gently, like she didn’t want to wake him.

But nothing was going to wake him for hours. Not till his body started cramping up and slapping him round the gut demanding its next fix.

When he was sleeping the muscles in his face that were permanently strained when he was awake relaxed. He looked just like the Spark I’d first met with his long blond hair falling chaotically over his cheeks and his shoulders. He was always swatting it out of his eye. Refused to tie it back in a pony tail or cut it short. The only time it wasn’t getting in his way was when he had his hood up. I liked the way he fussed over it and tutted. It was childish and grown up at the same time. Just like him. Too young for the world and too old for the world all in one.

I lay down behind him, spooning him with an arm wrapped round him and his hand in mine. I closed my eyes and breathed in time with him, slowing my body right down so it moved

with his. I wanted to peel aside his skin and crawl underneath with him and see the world through his clear, blue, troubled eyes. What did he see that was so frightening? What was it like always to be that scared? Maybe if I knew I could help him to realise the ghosts he saw in every shadow weren't really there.

Only something inside me told me they were, and even in this place that felt so safe I saw Tyler Cross's laughing face. I saw the disbelief on teachers' faces when I'd gone to them in the early days. Their disbelief had soon turned to anger. We were the troublemakers. Everyone knew that. We were the ones who were no good. We were the bullies. Tyler and his kind had soon put that about and the teachers believed him straightaway. Why wouldn't they? He always wore his uniform right. He got picked for the school football team. He turned up to lessons and got his homework in on time. If he said it, it must be true.

It felt like we'd had our lips sewn together with barbed wire. And the louder we screamed the more it shredded our flesh.

How could I tell him the ghosts weren't there? All I could do was be strong enough to fight them off both of us.

When I knew I couldn't sleep, I kissed him on the back of the head and went back to join the others.

Ten

“Can’t sleep,” I said, throwing myself down onto a piece of black velvet that was so soft and so deep it almost folded over on top of me.

“Of course you can’t,” said Sal.

“So do you guys ever sleep?” I asked. Sal and Shell were lying back half-drowned in fabric like I was, but their eyes were still alert. I wondered how late it was, or whether I’d entered a place where time didn’t really make sense any more. JB was sitting against the wall cradling the acoustic guitar. His hands were moving but I couldn’t see if they were touching the strings, and there was certainly no sound coming out, or none I could hear over the Rolo Tomassi album that was playing.

“Not much.” Shell laughed, and Sal smiled, and yet again it felt like there was some kind of joke I wasn’t in on.

“So where did you come from?” asked Sal. She threw me a can of Relentless. They seemed to have them stashed everywhere like change down the back of a sofa. No wonder no one slept.

“Oxford.”

She and Shell looked at each other. “That’s not very far,” she said.

“It’s a whole world away.”

“Well that’s true and not true.”

What does that mean?” I asked.

“It seems to me you’re running from something that scares you pretty badly,” said Sal.

“Yeah.”

“You know, the things that are scariest of all,” she said. “They’re up here.” She pointed to her head. “You can run to the other end of the world or you can stay right where you are, it makes no difference. They’ll either come along with you or you’ll leave them far behind.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. I thought of Spark, sleeping peacefully for the first time since I didn’t know when. I thought how happy he’d been that night. And then I thought of his cold, clammy skin and his cramping body and the look that couldn’t hide the pain when he needed a fix. “But it feels like we’re a step ahead of them. For now. I don’t know if that’s enough to leave them behind forever but it’s the best we’ve had in years.”

Sal gave me a look that was so warm it felt like she’d put her arms right around me like my mother had never done.

“What Sal also means,” said Shell. The fun had gone from her face, like she wanted to make clear I needed to listen to this, “is there are some pretty scary things that aren’t in your head, and Camden’s not a long way from Oxford.”

I shrugged

Shell wasn’t having it. “Listen,” she said. “Be careful. You’re safe here. In this place. And no one’s going to ask you to leave. As long as you need us or want us, this is your home. Remember that. But if you go tagging the streets

everywhere you go, sooner or later someone's going to catch up with you."

It felt like I had two mums. Cuddly mum and scary mum. I'd never had either before.

"No one's looking for us," I said.

"Yeah?"

"No one ever noticed we were there."

"Yeah?" she said again. "Well that's a whole load of different from no one will notice you're gone."

I shrugged again. I felt like a naughty teenager. Which I was. Only no one had ever made me feel it before.

Suddenly her face relaxed and her voice changed. "So I get what you're running from." She glanced over my shoulder at the room where Spark was asleep. "But who are you trying to leave behind? Parents?"

"Parents are the ones who never noticed we were there."

"Everyone feels like that when they're your age."

"Maybe."

"They'll miss you. You know that."

I shrugged again.

"Doesn't mean I'm saying you should go back. I'm just saying you need to put it in the equation."

"I guess."

"So it's not them?"

"No."

"Wanna tell me?"

“It sounds weak,” I said.

“I saw the relief in your eyes when you came in here,” she said. “No one feels that kind of relief unless they’re scared shitless. And nothing that scares you that shitless is weak, whatever it sounds like.”

“It started three years ago,” I said. “We both came to school from out of town. We were both different. When you’re an outsider you better learn the local customs or you stay on the outside, right?”

Shell raised an eyebrow.

“Only when you’re on the outside it’s not even like they draw a line somewhere and say keep out and provided you keep out they don’t come looking.”

“Takes guts to stick to who you are for three years.”

“Or heroin. Or burning yourself on the arm with cigarettes.”

She winced. “Maybe.” I could see she felt his pain, but there was no judgement. “So how did you get through it?”

“I told myself it wasn’t forever. I told myself it would end, and then it would be over and we could get on with what came next. We just had to keep alive till then.”

There was almost a tear in her eye. It felt weird to have someone listen who wasn’t Spark. And it was different. With Spark we weren’t listening to each other, we weren’t sounding off. We were planning and plotting and it was about

what we were going to do. It was like what kept us alive was looking forward. Like that story in the Bible about the woman who looks over her shoulder to see what she left behind and gets turned to a pillar of salt.

“So why now?”

“They were waiting for us. Last night. We were out painting and smoking and they were waiting. They were like animals. It wasn’t a beating. It was like they wanted to kill us.”

Shell was silent. She looked me up and down and then she stared me straight in the eye. Then she looked away. Like there was something she really wanted to say but couldn’t.

Sal sat up straight and lit up. “It sounds to me like the grown-ups in both your lives have been pretty hopeless.”

“Teachers would rather believe them,” I said. “They look right. Act right. Why wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah,” she said, closing their eyes. “Why wouldn’t they?” It sounded like she knew what I meant. I wished she’d been my teacher. I wished she’d been my mum. Or maybe I just wished my mum had survived.

“You know,” said Shell. “If you run, you have to run. And you have to keep running. Not physically. Not necessarily, anyway. But you have to keep watching. You have to keep remembering you’re on the run. You have to remember that every time you go to the shops for milk.”

“I know. I wasn’t thinking long term. I was just thinking get out of there if we want to be alive this time tomorrow. We’ve almost made it that far. That feels like an achievement right now.”

Sal pressed something and The Kills started playing. Black Balloon. The one with the video of Alison Mosshart turning into a vampire. My favourite music video ever. Sal stood up and came over next to me and sat down and put her round me and I collapsed into her. She gave me the kind of hug I’d always wanted a big sister to give me when I got home from school beaten and bruised. I felt so safe I knew it was OK to stop all that trying, all that worrying, all that looking out for the both of us, and just let it go and sleep. Only I still wasn’t tired. So I closed my eyes and enjoyed the smell of tobacco and incense and weed on her clothes and let everything out of my head except the feel and the smell of safety.

Eleven

At some point Sal shifted me onto the throw and went to the kitchen. From the noises and the smell I guessed she was making coffee, which I guessed meant their daytime routine was starting up though I was thoroughly disoriented about what time it was already. All I'd gathered about their day to day lives was that Sal and Shell ran a store, and when they weren't running a store they were hanging out, but they never seemed to sleep. Which may have been connected to the fact the one thing they did all the time was drink things that were fuelled up with caffeine.

“Want to come in with us?” asked Shell.

“What happened to look over my shoulder till I die?”

She smiled. “You know, when those scary things come chasing you, running is only one option.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. There's another option. You turn round, face the fuckers down, and hunt them into the ground.”

“And that's the one you'd recommend, is it?”

She shrugged and laughed. Looked behind me. I turned round. Sal had a massive tray with a huge pot of coffee and five mugs. Shell leaned in. “If you do, then whatever happens you can stop running,” she whispered.

“Yeah, maybe because you're dead.”

“And maybe if you keep running you’ve already died a little.”

“Looks like she’s giving you some of her cod philosophy,” said Sal, putting the tray down on a spare piece of floor.

“Something like that.”

“Should we let him sleep?” asked Sal.

I didn’t know. It felt like a weird kind of domestic decision. The kind of thing I hadn’t expected to be thinking about. Not road movie kind of stuff. But it felt OK in a funny kind of way. It felt like everyday life. Like long-term. And long-term was good.

“Yeah,” I said.

When we got outside it was light. I looked at my phone. It was 9 o’clock. I had no idea if that felt like the right time. The walk to Camden Lock Market seemed shorter than it had the previous night. We all walked with a spring in our step like it being a new day was exciting.

Which it was, I thought as I chewed on one of the bagels we’d picked up on the way. This time yesterday I’d been comatose and half beaten to a pulp. Today I’d all but forgotten getting the bruises. I couldn’t even feel them. Tyler’s face was all but gone from my head, but I remembered what Shell had been saying. And part of me knew that however good it felt I had to keep my eyes open and my wits about me.

Especially when every hundred yards or so I saw Spark’s tags. True, I was watching out

for them. But they were unmistakable. And everyone at Black Lane High knew they were his. And like Shell said, we weren't a million miles from Oxford.

But the sun had come out for us and I wasn't going to let that kind of thought too close to the front of my mind.

"You look different," said Shell.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You're walking different. Less hunched. Less bothered. It's good."

I smiled, and we carried on, just walking and eating and talking nonsense.

I kind of saw him coming.

I was taking in the crowd. All ages, colours, dress codes. People on their way to work. People on their way back from wherever. People on their way to nowhere.

His clothes didn't stand out more than anyone else's. He was in a retro Adidas top with combats and trainers.

It was the eyes.

Everyone else was in their own little world. Thinking their own thoughts.

He was looking straight at us.

When he was about a yard away he opened his mouth.

"Cut the bagels, fatty."

Next to me Shell came to a sudden halt.

Instinctively I stopped as well. So did Sal and JB.

We were blocking the pavement.

“What did you say?” said Shell.

“You heard me, fatty.”

It must have been over in a few seconds. No one stopped. No one looked. Like we weren't there.

Shell reached out. Grabbed him by the shoulders. Bundled him into a doorway. Let go with one hand. Drew back. Landed a punch with her full force to his groin. Brought her forehead down on his nose before he could double up. He crumpled to the floor. She kicked him in the groin three more times. Stopped. Not for breath. Like she was considering what next. Placed one foot on his forehead. Rolled it back. Brought the other one down with every ounce of strength in her body onto his windpipe. His eyes nearly popped out of his head. She removed the first foot. Brought it down with the same force across the bridge of his nose, pushing his eyes back through his shattered skull.

Fell back in step with us.

Started walking.

I froze to the spot.

The others carried on without looking back.

I couldn't look at the guy. But he was there, in the corner of my eye. Motionless and oozing blood. No one else was looking either. Like he was invisible. I felt completely alone. Not even like I had done two nights earlier. At least then I'd woken up to feel Spark's breath on

me. Spark! He was still in the flat. I had to get him out. All of a sudden I felt very, very alone.

I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around myself. The sun was already warm but I was freezing.

There was a hand on my shoulder. I pulled away and opened my eyes.

It was Sal. She'd come back for me.

I looked for places to run. But the only place to go was back to the flat.

"It's OK," she said.

"It's not OK."

"I think there's stuff we need to tell you."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Come on," she said. "We can walk and talk."

"You know what," I said. "This is what I was running away from. This is what Tyler Cross and his jerks did to me. It's the same. No. It's not the same. It's worse. Because you let me think I was safe. Let me think I'd found people I could trust."

She just smiled at me and held out her arm. I couldn't get my head to work. All I knew is I couldn't go anywhere without Spark, so I started walking.

"I met Shell about three years ago," she said. "I'd come to Camden because, like you I guess, it seemed the obvious place for someone like me to end up."

"Someone like you?"

“In pain. Wanting enough noise all around me that I never had to listen to the noise in my head. Wanting to be alone, but for there always to be people, wherever I looked, wherever I went. People I didn’t have to be scared of. My husband had been dead two weeks. Killed by the accident that took our two daughters. Drunk driver. They died instantly. So did the guy who killed them. It took Pete two years. Two years to cope with an empty house, without them, with needing someone to scream at and having no one. Just this body, this shell that used to be him. ‘Don’t tell him,’ the doctors said. ‘Don’t tell him they’re gone. In case he can hear. In case there’s any chance of him waking up and that scuppers it.’ So I didn’t. I bought two diaries and I went home every night, in the dark, and wrote in them what I imagined our daughters would have done if they’d lived. They had such wonderful lives, full of art and school trips and dreams and success. The next day I’d go back in the dark and read them to him.

“One morning I went in, and I read what I’d written the night before. I folded the diaries and put them back in my bag and I heard a noise. Rasping breath. He was awake. He looked at me and said, ‘What a beautiful thing. I’ve heard every word.’ And he smiled. And then he said, ‘I know they’re dead. I saw them die. And you did that for me.’ And then he died.

“Two weeks later the last of his family left our big, empty house. I didn’t even wave

them off. I closed the door and walked down the drive with them, and ended up at the Club.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. What else was I supposed to say? “So where does Shell fit in?”

“She got me through.”

“Yeah?”

“She’s a remarkable person, Kayla. She’s been hurt like you can’t imagine. Like I can’t really imagine.”

“She was hurt worse than you?”

“She makes me look like I’ve had a charmed life. But she was still there for me. And she’ll be there for you, as well. You’ll need friends, Kayla, when.”

She went quiet. I looked at her but she was looking away. I knew what she wanted to say.

I changed the subject. “So was that guy something to do with the hurt?”

“Yes.”

“And that makes it OK to smash his face in?”

Sal stopped walking and turned round to look me right in the eye. She was giving me one of those stares I’ve seen parents give when their kids are screaming and telling them to shut up won’t work. A stare that stops you in your tracks. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, that makes it OK.”

It was a statement, but it felt like a question. No, it *was* a question. This was where I could leave if I wanted. I could go back to the flat, pick up Spark, and head somewhere else. And

keep moving on, and on, I thought. I thought about what Shell had said about being on the run. If I ran now, I'd never stop. I didn't know what I felt about what Shell had done. Other than confused, and like things were going too fast.

I scanned Sal's face for a few seconds, like maybe I could find an answer there. I couldn't. But then, without me knowing why or where it came from, I realised the moment of choice had been and gone. And I was OK with it. Or at least I would be.

"Can we get coffee?" I asked and started walking.

"Sure."

"So what happened?"

"When?"

"With Shell. How did she get hurt?"

"It's not my place to say."

"OK," I said, and we dived into a café for double espressos and scuffed along the pavement together in silence, thinking and drinking.

Camden at that time of morning was noisy. It was a good kind of noise. The kind you kind hide yourself in. Cars and buses and chatter and music.

And laughter. It was like someone had put laughing gas in the air. Camden was obviously a happy place to be.

"Let's go and have a look," said Sal.

"Eh?"

She pointed. Towards Camden Lock. There was a crowd of people. They were all

pointing at something and laughing. I sped up to keep in step with her.

We got to the bridge over the canal and I pushed my way past a couple of guys in hoodies. There was something going on on the towpath. There was a pile of crap on the bank. A cone and a trolley. Stuff that looked like it had been fetched out of the canal. And there was a massive splashing in the water. Someone was in there. They didn't look like they were drowning. Certainly no one who was watching thought so. They were fighting with something. Like Tarzan with a crocodile. Only it wasn't a crocodile. It was something metal. They'd reached the bank, dumped it on the path. A twisted piece of metal. They hauled themselves out. Picked up the metal. Lifted it over their head like they were holding a trophy. It was a *men at work* road sign. Applause burst out. And cat calls. They did a 360.

It was Spark.

He saw me and grinned from ear to ear.

How the hell had he got there before me? More to the point what was he doing?

What he was doing was beaming. He was in his element. Filthy, rusty element maybe but *his* element nonetheless. I could feel his excitement. His sense of fun. Of life, as ridiculous as that was. There he was, in the centre of a crowd and for once they weren't beating the shit out of him. He was playing for them, and they were loving him. I felt a swell of pride for him. And so happy.

What happened next happened in a haze. My hands were on top of the rail of the bridge. Then my feet. I was standing. Balancing. I dived. Hit the water. Swam for the shore. Flicked myself up onto the path. Threw my arms around him and kissed him right on the lips. We were kissing for what felt like minutes. People were cheering all around us. I felt drunk and high and I could feel the blood pumping through Spark as he held my face in his hands.

“Just what are you doing?” I said when I surfaced.

He smiled. A wide-eyed innocent kind of smile. Blue eyes that were jacked up on smack but just as beautiful as the day I met him staring right into my soul. It was a look that said *isn't it obvious?*

“I’m making art,” he said.

I raised an eyebrow.

He let go of me and carried the trolley, and then the cone, an umbrella, and finally the men at work sign, and rested them neatly against a wall. Then he picked up can of paint and sprayed:

Entropy is bollocks (please remove this notice)

“Entropy is bollocks?” I said.

“Yeah. It’s a myth. It’s what people tell you to stop you living. The universe is decaying, the world is going bad, life is slowing down, everything ends in death. Hear it enough and you believe it. You become part of the ugliness. But

life isn't slowing down. And everything doesn't end in death. Life goes as fast as you want it. And it can be as beautiful as you want to make it."

He turned and tagged the wall in a few seconds with a spark.

"That's what the spark is, Kayla," he said. "It's our stand against decay. It's the thing we have to keep alive. And we keep it alive by living. Not by being alive waiting to die, but by making things beautiful, making people laugh, making the blood pump in the veins of the world. Don't you see?"

"I see you're high," I said.

"I may be high but that doesn't mean I'm not right."

I thought about that first night under the bridge, and our promise that we'd always keep each other safe. For a moment I forgot that his body was falling apart before my eyes. I forgot that we'd left school, that we were on the run, that our world was closing in on us faster than we could ever imagine. And I believed he was right. I believed that whatever we had we could make last forever. That we should make it last forever, like it was our destiny or something. And that this mad, caffeine-fuelled, sleep-deprived dream world we'd entered under a day ago was how we'd do it.

Sal was waiting for us by the entrance to Camden Lock Market.

"You have a point," she said.

“Eh?” Spark looked like he’d only just remembered there was a world out there apart from us.

“Entropy,” said Sal.

I’d started to come down from the adrenalin. I felt warm. Content. But I also realised Spark’s optimism was misplaced. It might make the time we had together more enjoyable. But it couldn’t extend it. Nothing could. And if he kept announcing his presence to the whole world like that it might start shortening it. But Sal looked serious. Like she really thought he had a point.

“It can’t be true, can it?” said Spark.

“It can,” said Sal. She paused. “But sometimes I’m not sure it is.”

Spark shook his head. “Think about it. All this. Every person, every car, every blade of grass, every drop of water, every crystal of ice, slowing down and spreading out till it becomes some kind of disconnected soup of stuff, frozen at absolute zero.”

“Sounds like the twenty-first century,” I said.

“No kidding,” said Spark. “But come on. It can’t be like that. It just can’t. All this life. All this energy. It can’t just vanish. Can it?”

Sal nodded. “It can,” she said. “Of course it can. But I don’t think it will.”

Spark smiled at her. He looked genuinely grateful. Like he was a terrified child waking up from a nightmare, and she was his mother

reassuring him it would be all right. I wondered if she was just being kind to him.

By the time we reached *Forgotten and Alone*, Shell had set up. She was sitting behind the counter playing with the volume of the stereo that was pumping out a tune by The Kills.

“Hey, where did you get to?” she asked when she saw us, like she’d completely forgotten she’d just killed someone.

“Our guests have been staking out their territory in Camden’s wild frontier of weirdness,” said Sal.

Shell looked instinctively at me. Spark noticed. I saw his shoulders hunch, slightly offended, slightly resigned.

Sal sensed it too. She put her arm round Spark. “Our budding artist here has been playing Jake and Dinos Chapman with crap from the bottom of the canal.”

“Nice,” said Shell, nodding her head. She threw him a can of Relentless.

Caffeine, I thought. The answer to everything in this place. As I thought it, I noticed yet again that I wasn’t tired. After no sleep and all that had happened that was weird. But I was too hyped to give it any more thought.

“You know what we have to do?” said Spark, grabbing my hand. “We have to get tattoos. Flames.”

“Yeah!” It was so right, I couldn’t believe we hadn’t done it already. “So where do we go?” I asked Shell. Her arms were covered in the most

beautiful knotwork tattoos. We must have passed ten basements and boutiques advertising tattoos and piercings on our way from the flat. She'd know which one to use.

Shell didn't say anything. She shifted around on her feet awkwardly.

I looked at Sal.

She didn't meet my eye.

What was this? Had they become my disapproving parent all of a sudden? Where did they get off doing that after what I'd seen this morning?

"What is it?" I said.

They looked at each other and shifted some more. I'd had it.

"Come on, it's a tattoo. It's not like I'm suggesting I go out and stamp on someone's face."

I had a feeling I'd gone too far. They looked at each other one last time, shrugged, sighed, and Sal said, "Jimmy Juju's. Just past the market, up the stairs over Metal Hedz."

"Thanks." I smiled.

The two of them smiled back uneasily. So much had happened. It felt like there were a hundred conversations we all needed to have but no one was ready to start them.

Just past Camden Market was a weird-looking cafe that sold grass drinks and other strange-looking herbal stuff that looked like it belonged in a biosphere not a high street. And past that was a row of shops all selling belts and

studs and boots and brightly coloured hoodies. They all had massive plastic-looking sculptures stuck on the upper floors of the buildings, and unlit stairs going down to goodness knows where that had bits of A4 paper with arrows and scrawl drawn on them in marker pen promising CDs or late night live music or tattoos. Some of them just had arrows and no writing. I made a note to come back and check those ones out.

I scanned the sculptures. Two buildings down was one of a gun-metal head with a Mohawk. I figured that must be Metal Hedz. It was a tiny store that seemed just to sell buckles. Metal buckles, some of them painted enamel in a style that was a mix of kitsch and gore.

The place was only a few feet wide but it still managed to have stairs going up and down. Neither had so much as an arrow. Let alone words. Or lights.

“No signs. That’s got to be good,” said Spark.

“No need to advertise,” I said.

He nodded. “Must be the best,” he said, climbing the stairs, disappearing in front of me.

The ground flattened out in front of me. I almost bumped into the back of Spark. A door opened and we stumbled in.

“You must be talking about me,” said a small, wiry guy who looked about 50.

“Jimmy?” asked Spark.

“Jimmy Ju Ju,” he said in a thick East London accent. He smiled at Spark and his face

filled with creases. There wasn't a gram of spare flesh on him. His teeth were small and crooked, and his eyes were so bright I half expected them to light up Spark's face. He scared me. He didn't have the warmth of Sal or the amiable cluelessness of JB. He was restless. Like he was unhappy with his lot in life. Like he was always on the lookout for a bit of action. Whatever action meant to him.

I wondered how careful someone like that would be with a needle. I looked around the walls behind him. I'd expected photos of his work. Pictures of his designs. There were none. There were some old posters of Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver* and *Mean Streets*. That was all. Just black peeling walls, a threadbare carpet, and black creased curtains through to what I guessed was his studio.

"Sal sent us," said Spark. "From *Forgotten and Alone*."

"Nice," he said, holding out an arm. Spark touched fists and Jimmy grinned.

Then he looked at me. And froze.

He looked back at Spark like he wanted to ask a question. Spark was oblivious.

What the hell was that about?

Jimmy looked back at me.

"You want a tattoo?" he asked me. The swag had disappeared from his voice. It was like I'd turned up at a vegan café and asked them for raw steak.

"Er, yeah," I said.

“And Sal sent you?”

“Yes.” He was freaking me out even more. I was starting to think this was a really bad idea.

“We want flames,” said Spark. “Like match flames. You got a pen?”

“Eh?” Jimmy seemed to have forgotten Spark was there.

“A pen,” Spark repeated. “So I can draw it.”

“Yeah, sure.” The colour – or the unwashed waxy grey at any rate – had disappeared from Jimmy’s face. He reached behind a counter and pulled out an A4 pad and a black felt tip.

“Cheers,” said Spark.

But Jimmy was still watching me. And I was still thinking it was time to leave. But I could see how into it Spark was. And this was for him, after all. I focused on Spark’s fingers moving over the paper at a hundred miles an hour. It still amazed me how he could convey so much with just a few flicks.

“Like that,” said Spark. Jimmy looked me over one last time, shrugged, and looked at the paper. “This bit in yellow.” Spark pointed. “And this in orange. Same for both of us. Here,” he said, pointing to the inside of his arm, a few inches over his wrist. I watched Jimmy’s face. It didn’t flinch at the scarring or the trackmarks.

“Yeah, no worries,” said Jimmy. His voice and his colour were starting to return. “You first.”

“All right,” said Spark.

Jimmy headed to the back of the room and pulled open the curtain. We followed. He looked for a moment like he was going to ask me to wait outside, but he didn't.

The curtain closed behind us. For a moment there was total blackness and the only thing I sensed was the sound of breath.

Then the lights went on. I was expecting one of those moments like you get on the TV where someone opens their eyes and their whole house has been transformed into this sparkling palace. It was nothing like that. Just more flaking paint. A sofa covered in frayed black cloth against one wall. A chipped black work surface against the opposite one. There were inks, needles, tubes scattered randomly on the surface. A few machines hooked up in the corner.

“Sit,” said Jimmy. Spark sat on a big black adjustable chair. “Sweet.” Jimmy flicked a switch behind him. Music came on. Too loud to talk over. Some kind of early 90s rave. Not what I was expecting.

Soon I'd forgotten how uneasy Jimmy had made me feel. I was amazed how different it was watching him work from watching Spark. Every movement was planned. Deliberate. But I sensed every bit of the single-minded focus Spark had when he was painting. It was like some kind of curtain came down and blocked out everything else but the surface immediately in front of him.

After a while I stopped watching Jimmy.

My eyes moved to Spark. He had that look. The one he'd had when he'd been burned under the bridge. Like he was zoned out completely. Somewhere else. Not here. Not in this room. Not in London. Not even in this life or this world, if that made sense. Like he was somewhere all the pain was gone. The tension had gone from his face altogether. Every muscle was loose. Like the skin flopping from gran's cheeks when I saw her in the coffin.

At the time I'd had no idea what that look meant. In the years since, when Spark opened up, I learned it was exactly like it looked. Pain was like the heroin for him. It took him out of himself. Somewhere else. He wasn't able to say where, just that it was somewhere good. Somewhere the endless aches that consumed his body and the million different noises that cannoned round the inside of his head every moment of every day were absent. Where everything was about that single piece of pain and nothing else. The way he described it, that pain wasn't even a bad thing, it was like some kind of umbilical chord hooking him up to a life source. Or some hippy crap like that. And every other piece of shit in his life disappeared.

As long as the pain lasted.

He'd been escaping that way since he was seven.

I have no idea how long I was there staring at Spark's face, his eyes open but absent.

I felt like crying. It hurt me so much to know he had to do that to escape the pain of just being alive. It hurt me so much in a selfish way that I couldn't do that on my own. But at the same time it made me want to cry with joy knowing he was in a good place, even if I knew it wouldn't last.

"That's it," said Jimmy. The music went silent. The moment the needle stopped, I sensed Spark returning to his body. The tension returned to his skin.

"How much?"

"A ton," said Jimmy.

Spark fetched out some notes, palmed them to Jimmy, and repeated the process. "For Kayla," he said. I could sense he needed to leave. Jimmy handed him some lube and a small roll of cling film, and told him to wrap up.

Spark flashed me a smile. Its beauty made me stop breathing for a few seconds. Moments like that made me realise how completely I loved him. He held his wrist up and smiled again. "Safe, yeah?" he said.

"Safe, yeah," I mouthed back at him.

It was only when I heard the door close I realised I was alone with Jimmy. I swallowed, and sat in the chair. He finished cleaning, laying out and setting up new gear. All the time he avoided looking at me. There was a thick silence between us. I hoped the awkwardness would disappear once he was focused on the tattoo.

I rolled up my sleeve and placed my forearm on the rest.

“OK,” he said, gloving up.

“OK.”

He stood there with the machine in his hand, staring at my arm. It was like he'd never seen skin before. I felt myself shift nervously. I didn't know whether to say anything. But in the end I didn't know what I'd say so I closed my eyes. The old rave started up again and I waited for the buzzer and the pain.

I heard the machine start up, and a light pressure on my skin. The pain didn't come.

“Have you started?” I asked.

Jimmy was silent for a second or so before he answered. “Yes,” he said. His voice was more hesitant than when he spoke to Spark.

“It doesn't hurt,” I said.

This time it felt like he was silent for minutes. “Ever had a tattoo before?” he asked eventually.

“No.”

“Everyone reacts differently,” he said, and carried on.

I didn't open my eyes until the music stopped. I just sat there, trying to control my breathing, trying to think of the smell of Sal's warm clean clothes and not Jimmy's cheap aftershave.

“There you go,” said Jimmy.

I looked at my wrist. It was beautiful. It had all the life and energy of Spark's tags. Sal was right. He was good. Really good. I forgot my nerves. “Thanks,” I said, warmly.

“You’re welcome.” He took off the gloves, scrubbed himself clean and leant back against the work surface, like he was waiting for me to leave.

“Do I get some of that stuff you gave Spark?” I asked.

Jimmy looked at me for a moment like he hadn’t a clue what I was talking about. Then he seemed to catch on. “Yeah, of course,” he said, handing me some lubricant and a roll of cling film.

When I got back to the store Spark was calm again. And excited.

“So?” he asked

“So?”

“So show me.”

I could see his arm was wrapped with film. I’d completely forgotten to cover up. I wasn’t feeling raw or tender at all. I guessed that would come later.

Spark held out his arm and waited for me to do the same. Side by side they couldn’t have looked more different. The whole area around spark’s tattoo was tight and red. The redness was so deep it disguised much of the colour of the ink. My arm was its usual colour. The flame was burning a crisp, beautiful orange and yellow.

“So what are you?” he said. “Some kind of freak of nature?”

“Jimmy said everyone reacts differently,” I said.

“He’s right,” I heard Sal say. She was sitting in the store. Neither she nor Shell, nor JB, who’d joined them since I’d been gone, seemed to want to see.

“There’s different and there’s different,” said Spark. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” I said. “You?”

He looked at me in a way that said it’d hurt like hell if it wasn’t for the heroin.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“Yeah, it is.” He looked at it like he was looking at a stunning piece of street art. “Just like you.”

I smiled. “Forever,” I said.

“Forever.” He put his unbound arm around me and held me. I put both of mine around him and closed my eyes and listened to his slow heartbeat and let myself forget everything else.

Spark and I spent a couple of hours exploring the markets and surrounding streets. We weren’t really shopping though we went in pretty much every store. We weren’t even window shopping. We were just enjoying the fact it was daytime and we didn’t have to think about school.

We didn’t say much. After the excitement of the morning it was good to be just the two of us.

It was the happiest we’d get.

Twelve

Outside the market, by the canal, there was a small courtyard made of wooden decking. There was a stall selling fresh juice. The smell of oranges seemed to drown out the smoke and dope that hung like a fog over the rest of Camden. The thought of something fresh, something that was more than caffeine and water, was so tempting I'd bought a large tumbler full and was standing there, idly licking bits from my lips and waiting for Spark, who was looking at leather journals on one of the craft stalls.

I wasn't looking anywhere or at anyone in particular, but I got this strange sense that something weird was going on around me. My eyes were drawn to a figure standing outside the sushi bar on a similar bit of decking over the water.

He was somewhere in his 20s at a guess. Though with wraparound sunglasses, a baggie Black Flag t-shirt, combats, a bald head and wiry arms covered in blue tattoo ink a guess is all it was.

In other words, he looked just like a hundred other people I could have picked on. Except he was staring right at me.

And when my eyes met his specs, he didn't look away.

I quickly went back to my drink, holding the plastic container in front of my face for way too long, letting the juice slosh round the outside

of my closed lips. I tried to stare without staring. His eyes were still fixed on me. No, wait.

He was looking down at his phone. And back at me. And back at his phone. There was only one thing I could think that made sense. He was comparing me with a photo. A photo of what though? Of who?

Could he have a photo of me? If he had a picture of me, I thought, then he had a picture of Spark as well.

I've never really got that guilty thing people talk about, that caught-with-a-hand-in-the-cookie-jar feeling. I'd only really felt guilt because I couldn't stop Spark destroying himself. And about mum. But I guessed this is what people mean. A sudden smashing pulse was coming out of my chest. My skin went cold and hot and cold and damp uncontrollably. I could feel the blood being sucked from my face, then flushing it then draining away again. I felt like the whole world had gone dark and someone had switched on a single spotlight and they were shining it right at me.

I didn't know why he'd have our picture but I knew it couldn't be a good reason. I had to stop him seeing us together. I had to stop Spark coming out into sight.

Act cool, I told myself, hoping the guy couldn't see the cogs turning inside my head. Somehow sure he could. I opened my mouth and swilled the remains of my juice in one mouthful.

It caught in my throat and made me splutter. So much for cool.

I binned the tumbler. “Thanks,” I said nonchalantly to the juice guy, and without looking over the water I turned and walked slowly and smoothly into the market. I scanned the hall for Spark. I couldn’t see him. Why couldn’t he just stay still? OK, I thought, how do I sweep the place and keep myself between him and the exit? When there were four exits I could think of off the top of my head. And it was at most 20 seconds from any of them right into phone guy’s line of sight.

If phone guy was still there and hadn’t gotten curious.

As discreetly as I could I started leafing through cushion covers, trying to find a natural angle for my head so I could see through the entrance past the juice stall. All kinds of interesting earth-coloured designs I tried to make myself think. African, maybe. Or Indian. I nodded to myself. Method acting the tourist. Nodded harder. The stallholder must have thought I was nuts. But I edged back a couple of small paces, arm outstretched like one of those old people who can’t see things right in front of them. Nodded some more.

Got a perfect view. Just for a second.

He wasn’t there.

Gone for more sushi, I told myself.

I didn’t believe it.

Come for me.

Come for us.

Pressure on my shoulder.

Grip.

I spun.

“Spark!” I gasped.

Shit. How loud was that? Was he listening for that name?

Keep calm.

“Hey, you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

He was high and chilled and still living the dream.

If I’d seen the whole thing in slow motion, there would have been decisions and calculations and maybe lists of pros and cons written on some kind of mental whiteboard. Tell him what was happening or pretend nothing’s wrong.

But it didn’t happen in slow motion.

“I think I’m finally exhausted,” I said.

“Can we go back to the flat?”

“Sure,” he said, putting his arms shakily round me. “I’m not surprised. You’ve been amazing.”

“No I haven’t,” I said, steering him to a more distant exit. I certainly didn’t feel amazing as we hit the sunlight. For the second time in a few minutes I was feeling that naughty schoolgirl guilt.

What I wasn’t feeling was tired.

The whole way back I watched reflections in windows and caught furtive glances over my shoulder and across the road. All I was thinking was were we being followed? What was going on? Had someone been tipped off we were here?

Who would want to know? The police? Tyler Cross? Spark's dealer? None of those options sounded good.

I tried to think what we should do next, but as long as we were outside I felt too exposed to concentrate. I took every second as it came. Watching. Like a deer or an impala or something on one of those nature programmes.

Every now and then Spark would say "yeah?" or "don't you reckon?" and I'd smile weakly and make a generic noise that he could take for anything he wanted. I hoped he'd think I was just tired. I didn't like keeping things from him. I'd learnt when I was very young that most people didn't like what happened in my head, and I'd spent my life keeping my thoughts to myself. Sometimes it had felt like my head would burst from them all trying to escape.

But with Spark I could say anything. I could say things like "When my brother was born I used to look at him in the cot sometimes and wonder if my hands would wrap all the way round his neck and how hard I'd have to squeeze before he stopped breathing and how it'd be cool to try," and he'd just say "I never knew you had a brother," and I'd say "I don't any more," and he'd leave it at that and say something about being an only child.

I was starting to get that head exploding thing again. But I knew I had to think for both of us for now. If there was going to be a later.

Spark opened the door to the flat with a key JB had given him. It was empty inside. It felt like coming home, like a safe space. Relatively speaking.

Spark was ready to take me to the bedroom and lay me down to rest like I'd done for him last night. He was gentle with his hands, guiding me rather than pushing, but even with his body so weak I could feel a residual strength in him. I knew he could hold me up if I was weak, or catch me if I fell.

"Here," I said in the living room. I loved its drapes and throws and soft, surrounding warmth. And I was sure I could still make out the comforting smell of Sal's clothes.

"OK," he said softly. "Want some music?" He went over to the stereo and started flicking through the files.

I wanted to ask him for something loud, something with a bass that would shake the building and screaming that would keep even the scariest thoughts at bay. But hiding or running from them didn't feel like an option I had any more. Maybe Shell had a point. Turn round, look them in the eye, and face the fuckers down. It was certainly an option. And it would be doing something rather than nothing, and right now that made it feel like a pretty good option.

"Something quiet," I said.

Spark found The XX and sat down next to me, put his arm around me and softly but firmly placed my head on his chest, just like Sal had

done. It was strange how the dynamic between us shifted, how often it felt like one of us was a carer for the other. How rarely we felt like two teenagers just doing their thing.

“Sleep as long as you like,” he said, though I could hear in his voice he knew that if I did at some point he’d have to find some way of sliding out from underneath me and going for a fix.

I had no intention of sleeping.

I lay there with my eyes open listening to the slow, quiet beats of the music and his heart, chewing over our options. All of which seemed to raise the further question of what happened next, in the long term, or even just after the next couple of days. That question had to wait. Maybe it would take care of itself by then, I thought.

The first thing I needed was information. What was that guy doing? Was there an innocent explanation for his interest in me? Was he mistaken? What the hell picture was he looking at? Maybe I was just being paranoid. Given what had happened it was hardly surprising I’d feel jumpy. Then again, given what had happened it would hardly be surprising if someone really was on our tail. Or at least looking.

No, I decided. I didn’t need information. I had to assume someone was looking for us. Someone who had pictures. Always best to prepare for the worst. Unless the worst was so completely overwhelming you couldn’t see a way

out. In which case burying my head in the sand looked really attractive.

“Can’t sleep?” asked Spark.

“Was I fidgeting?”

“Just a little.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s like Eastbourne here,” he said out of nowhere.

“Eastbourne?”

“Yeah, you know, where all the old people go when they’ve finished their moving around and they want to be by the sea and spend the rest of their days sitting on a bench on the seafront looking out at the waves and the wind blasts them a little more every day and flakes of their skin fall into the sand, get washed away and form beaches on the other side of the Atlantic and one day you walk past the bench where you’ve seen them every day for the last fifteen years and they’re not there. They’ve been eroded away completely by the wind and the waves.”

“There’s no sea for miles,” I said.

Spark laughed. “I love the way you change the subject.”

“I’m not changing anything. Maybe I’m just too dumb to catch on.”

“You’re as dumb as Kurt Cobain,” he said. He started singing the words to the Nirvana song Dumb. I was one when Kurt blew his brains out. Nirvana was old music, but I’d loved it as long as I could remember, and I’d read Kurt Cobain’s

journals before I was a teenager. It was one of the bonds we'd discovered early on.

"Seriously," he said. I didn't feel like being serious. "We've done running, haven't we?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Wherever it is we're going, it feels like we're there."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, it does."

"When you stop moving you die."

"Don't talk like that," I said, sitting up and looking him straight in the eye. "Don't ever talk like that."

"I'm not saying it's a bad thing. You want to settle, eventually, don't you? Enjoy just being."

"What happened to *entropy is bollocks*?"

"I guess it's me who's tired," he said.

He lay down and I wrapped cloth around him.

Soon he was asleep and I was alone with the music and my thoughts.

But only for a few seconds. I was relieved to hear the door.

I recognised the heavy footsteps. It was Shell.

"Coffee, you guys?" she called out.

I didn't need anything else to stop me sleeping, but if I was going to be awake I might as well be fully awake. "For me, please," I called back.

Shell came in, handed me a mug, and rested herself against the wall. She pulled her legs up under her chin and rested her head on her knees, holding her steaming coffee in front of her. Seeing her try to tuck herself up like that it was clear just how tall she was. She looked like one of those dogs whose legs have grown so long it doesn't know what to do with them. Her black hair tumbled everywhere. She seemed uncomfortable in her body. I wanted to give her an enormous hug. It was hard to square up the gentle giant I was looking at with the woman who'd stamped a man to death a few hours earlier.

"You're thinking about this morning," she said. A statement. Like she was reading my mind.

"Can you blame me?"

She smiled. "It seems like another world sitting here drinking coffee, doesn't it?"

"This whole thing feels like another world," I said.

"I guess it is."

We sat in silence, stretching out our drinks, not quite sure what to say next. I sensed her looking at Spark. I thought she was going to cry, and it scared me. I knew she felt pity for him. I knew she thought he was dying, and I didn't want to have to admit to myself there was part of me that thought she might be right.

"Who was he?" I asked eventually, deciding however awkward it was, it was easier to talk about her than to think.

“Part of my past.”

“A bad part?”

“Yeah.”

“A part you were running from?”

“I never ran from anything.”

She put her head on her knees and looked straight at me like she was inviting to look inside her soul and see if she was telling the truth. I didn't need to look. I believed her.

“Even when that means doing something bad?”

“Looking the past in the eye and telling it to go fuck itself can never be bad,” she said. I thought of the man looking at me that morning. I tried to imagine him walking towards me down the street, to imagine what I'd do. Would I dive into a shop? Would I stand there and try to pole-axe him like Shell had done? Or would I just freeze?

“Of course you're scared,” she said, like she could read my mind. “But this is your home now. You know that, don't you?”

“Yes.”

“If you run, maybe you'll never find another one.”

“I know.”

“So what's to think about?”

I smiled weakly.

“OK,” she said. “Let me put it like this. There's nothing to think about. You're just trying to get your head used to what you know with your heart is true. And you know what's the best

way to do that? Just get on and accept it. Your head will soon catch up.”

I looked at Spark. I was so used to talking things through with him. Sometimes it felt like we didn’t reach our own decisions, that there were only choices that we’d come to as a unit.

“You *shouldn’t* run,” said Shell, very gently. “But he can’t. It’s time to settle.”

“I’m afraid.”

“I know. But here’s the deal. If you run, you’ll be the same afraid forever. If you square up then one way or another things will be different after.”

I knew she was right, but I didn’t yet have any real idea what that meant.

Shell nodded towards Spark and got up to go to her room.

I looked down. He was looking back at me. I could see the tell-tale beads of sweat forming on his skin. I could see pain on his face and I looked down and saw his arm, wrapped in clingfilm, and it suddenly felt like getting tattoos may have been a really dumb idea. One that meant he’d need more heroin, not less.

He smiled at me through the pain. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “A few days and the wound’ll be all healed up. But the flame won’t go out.”

I ran my hand through his hair. It was still so soft. It felt like I was stroking a baby’s head. I liked it in a way. I hated that his body was so weak, but I liked being the strong one for once,

the one he could lean on, the one with the ideas. Only right now I didn't have too many of those.

Suddenly his face went absolutely white. He grabbed my hand.

"Ow," I said. A kneejerk reaction. Only I didn't really mean "ow". It didn't hurt. It should have hurt like hell, grabbing me right on the fresh wound from the tattoo. What I meant was "what the hell?"

He sat up straight, staring at my arm.

I looked down and felt the blood drain from my head.

Not only was the tattoo not red or sore, it had visibly faded, like a bright cloth that had been left out in the sun.

"So much for Sal's recommendation," I said.

Spark unwrapped his own arm. He winced. So did I as the plastic film peeled awkwardly away, pulling skin and oil and pus with it. Underneath, his arm was a livid red around the ink.

We held our arms together.

Spark started shaking.

"That's not right," he said quietly. "That's not right." He stood up. Put his hands on his head and started pulling at his hair. "What?" He kept blinking, hard, and repeating over and over, "What?"

I put my hands on his shoulders to calm him. "Hey," I said. "It's OK. There's obviously

something wrong with the ink. I'll go back tomorrow.”

He pushed me away and stared at my arm like it was toxic. “No,” he said, and he started repeating that over and over. He fell to his knees and started rocking and shaking his head wildly from side to side and all the time he was repeating, “No. No. No.”

“Come on,” I said, kneeling down in front of him and gripping his shoulders. “Hey, come on. It’s OK. Look at me.” I pulled his chin up so his eyes were level with mine. He flicked his eyes away. I turned his head. He flicked them the other way.

I pulled his head to my chest and cradled it there, stroking his hair, trying to make soothing shushing sounds. He started sobbing uncontrollably. I held his head still and let the warm tears wet my skin through my shirt. My eyes kept moving to my arm and I tried to tell myself I was right. There was just something wrong with the ink. But I was less and less sure. Why had the needle not hurt at all? Why was I still not tired? What was happening to me?

As his body calmed in my arms, I pulled his head back gently and kissed his cheeks. His skin was salty and wet from tears and sweat.

“Don’t you see, Kayla?” he said, looking at me with eyes that seemed so completely empty it felt like I was looking into a black hole. “Don’t you see, it’s a sign? Our time’s running out? Our flame’s dying.”

“Don’t be silly,” I said.

“We’re dying,” he repeated. Matter of fact, just like he was reading me a recipe. “It’s like an elephant’s graveyard. Or a salmon swimming back to the place it was born. After a life of being fucked over we’ve made it home in time to die.”

“Don’t say that.” I wanted to shout at him. I wanted to put my fingers in my ears and scream la la la. But more and more of me wondered if he was right, so I said it as softly as I could, like a lullaby, and held him to me, trying to calm him like a baby. But I felt his body tense, and start to twitch and cramp and curl tighter and tighter until he was almost in a ball. He fell to the side like a bird shot from its perch and lay there, rocking, his face twisted in pain so badly I barely recognised him.

I knew what I had to do, but my legs didn’t want to let me. I swallowed, closed my eyes, and forced myself upright. I made myself turn and head to our room. My body was fighting against me all the time. It was like taking steps underwater, but I made it inside. The bag was beside the bed. I made myself not sit down because I knew I’d never get up. I rummaged through the clothing and the notes for the hard, cold shape of the tin. It was an old Helix maths set tin. Essential kit for surviving at school he’d said to me once. I felt a black laugh turn my lips upward.

Going back was even harder. It must have taken me minutes. It was only the thought of his pain that forced each foot in front of the other.

Eventually I was at his side. I knew he was in too much pain to know I was there. I opened the tin. It felt like I was crossing a line I'd sworn I'd never come close to. But I'd crossed so many the past two days I told myself it was just one more. I had no real idea what to do next. I'd tried to keep as far away as I could from the drugs, as though keeping my distance could make them – and the pain they masked – not a real part of his life. I'd seen things on films when I was younger, but in the past years I'd not been able to watch that kind of thing. So I took a deep breath and hoped I wasn't going to kill him, telling myself that if I did nothing it may just kill him.

I unwrapped a bag of powder and poured it onto a sliver of foil. I held it up and waved a lighter underneath. Nothing happened at first and then it started to change, to move, to bubble and liquefy. It was hypnotic. I put the foil down, took a fresh syringe from its packing and drew the liquid inside it. I held it up to the light. It looked so innocuous, like less than a spoonful of weak tea. How could something like that possibly take such a hold on something as big and alive as the body rocking on the floor next to me, I wondered as I squeezed the air out.

I tried to prise Spark's arm free, the one that wasn't a weeping sore. He was clutching himself so tightly it took what seemed like

forever to get it in my grasp. I started whispering “I love you” although I knew he couldn’t hear. He was somewhere a long long way away. But I kept saying it, telling myself why I was doing it if nothing else. I unfurled the length of cord and tied it round his bicep as hard as I could. It felt cruel, like I was chaining up a helpless animal. “I love you” I kept repeating.

I held his arm as steady as I could in one hand. His body was still convulsing and mine was shaking. I held the needle against his skin with the other. He was so thin it was easy to see where his veins were. I hated needles. I couldn’t look. I thought I was going to pass out. I knew I couldn’t.

I tried to breathe as slowly as I could. I caught a glimpse of his face. It wasn’t Spark. It was a twisted ball of sinew and agony. One last breath. “I love you,” I almost screamed as I exhaled. In one movement I pushed. I felt his skin give and my thumb sank on the plunger. I closed my eyes and kept pushing, and almost immediately the shaking was gone. It was like the whole world had stopped. I didn’t dare open my eyes in case I’d killed him.

My bottom lip was starting to quiver. My stomach was cramping. My eyes were stinging. I opened them. I watched, captivated, as I pulled out the needle, and then my eyes drifted to his face. The knots had disappeared. The strange creature that had been lying on the floor had gone and Spark was back. He was so still and so

peaceful. "I love you," I said, cradling his head in my arms and listening to the slow steady pain-free breath.

Twelve

I must have held him like that for an hour. I didn't think, I didn't move. Nothing. I just held him and watched him breathing.

Finally, I let him go, packed his gear away, and took it back to the room. Alone at last, I sat on the bed and shook.

After a while there was a knock at the door, and Sal came in.

“Tough day, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“Why don't you come down to the club? Nothing takes your mind off things like music.”

“I don't know.”

“JB's band's playing. You'd like them.”

“JB's in a band?”

“Hell yeah.”

That I had to see. And she was right. The best way to get my head together was to have some downtime. And nothing was better for that than music.

“That tattoo guy you sent me to was shit, by the way,” I said as I got off the bed.

She didn't answer. I followed her down to the club. A Spiral Pitfall track was playing. Shell was already down there, sitting with her back against the wall drinking Relentless. The place was fuller than it had been the previous night. People were in to see the band. I could see drums and guitar stands and amps and mics set up at the far end. People were milling and easing closer to the stage.

Not far from Shell I could see JB standing with Spark, who looked calm and relaxed, like he'd forgotten all about this afternoon. JB looked awkward as I approached. I got the sense he didn't know how to act around me, but he and Spark seemed to get along fine. That was good. I couldn't remember the last friend Spark had had aside from me.

JB and Spark touched fists and JB made for the stage. Spark looked at me with an incredible tenderness. He said nothing but when he kissed me hello his lips lingered on mine like that was his way of saying thank you for earlier. I took his hand and squeezed. He squeezed back.

The music stopped and the lights went off, and for a moment the room was silent and dark.

A single light went on. There was a guy standing at a mic. He had short, neat black hair and he was wearing boot cut jeans and a polo shirt that was a bit too big. He looked like someone who worked for a bank, dressed for the weekend.

“Hey,” he half whispered into the mic.

Three more lights went on. There was a girl in some puff-sleeved floral dress with a blonde ponytail holding a bass, and another off duty banker behind the drums. And JB, staring down at the strings of his guitar.

Front guy leaned into the mic and said softly, “We’re Veins of Ecstasy.”

JB touched one of his strings and held it in front of the amp and the girl on the bass did

the same and the guy on the drums went mental, and front guy stood there behind the mic with his hands in his pockets staring us down like his eyes were pumping bullets into every one of us. He took one hand from his pocket and raised it so slowly and I could feel every eye in the room following it. Then he grabbed the mic and began to scream with a noise that sounded like a forest full of wolves on the hunt. JB and the girl picked up their guitars and for three minutes the room was filled with glorious, shapeless, all-consuming noise.

They hammered their way through what must have been twenty songs, each of them louder and shorter than the last till it felt like the room was going to explode and take the building, the street and the whole of London with it. And for the whole set I was blissfully unaware of anything else.

As suddenly as it started, the lights came up and a Prodigy track came on the stereo. It sounded tinny and timid.

JB put his guitar down and came over. Sal handed him a can and gave him her warmest smile, which I guessed was as close to a hug as she got with JB.

Spark's face was shining like Christmas lights. "You have to teach me how to play," he said.

"Yeah?" said JB. He sounded surprised at the interest.

"Absolutely."

“Sure.”

Spark beamed. That was it, I thought, feeling like a whole load of shit had been lifted off my shoulders. We were staying.

Thirteen

The singer came over and punched fists with JB. Close-up he looked even more like someone who worked for a bank. His skin was smooth and had the kind of softness you get from using products. Typical 20-something metrosexual. The sort of person I'd never be interested in talking to. Except for the fact I'd just heard him shred his voicebox with half an hour of the best death metal screaming I'd ever heard.

He flashed me a smile, which made him look even younger. Barely my age. "Garrett," he said.

"Kayla."

"Hey, Kayla." His voice was soft and uncertain. But behind that was an energy that hinted at what I'd seen on stage. And his eyes had something too. Mischief, I thought.

I was right.

"JB says you're an artist," he said to Spark.

"Yeah."

"You want to go and cover some space?"

"I did that last night."

"I sang two nights ago but I'll probably do it again tomorrow."

Spark looked at me. I could see he wanted to go. I could also see he wanted to stay there with me. Or maybe he just wanted me to say it was OK for him to go.

"Let's all go," I said.

His face lit up. Garrett slapped him on the back. JB looked up at me briefly.

“We’re going out,” I called to Sal and Shell. “Coming?”

“I’ll catch you up,” said Sal, who had a can in one hand and was mid conversation with Shell and the bass player.

I smiled over my shoulder at her, already heading for the exit and up the stairs to the street.

As we emerged out into the evening the sun was already down but the last traces of light remained, giving the sky a blue-grey tint – as far as I could tell past the orange light pollution.

The air was cool and the four of us walked abreast on the pavement, three of us talking and JB with his head down but a spring in his stride. We were totally wrapped up in the moment.

So wrapped up I hadn’t thought about specs guy from earlier.

Until I saw him.

What drew my attention was his stillness. It was late evening and people were going out or coming home, but everyone was on the move. Except him. He was just standing there, about twenty metres away at most. And for the second time he was staring straight at me.

Then he moved.

Not his legs. Just one arm. He raised his hand and pointed right at me.

I froze. I turned to see if Spark had spotted him. He hadn’t. He was jaunting along in

a world of his own. Then I heard a noise. Running.

Where? The guy was still standing there. Still pointing right at me.

Then he opened his mouth and I realised he wasn't pointing at me. And I saw where the noise of running was coming from.

"That's him," the guy shouted.

I spun round. For half a second Spark was oblivious and smiling, and about to say something to JB. Then he looked up. I followed his gaze. Two figures hurtling at him. Uniformed police. No more than a hundred feet. Seven shops away.

What the hell? No time to think. I spun back. The guy wasn't alone. A figure beside him.

A woman.

Miss Steele.

She leaned forward.

Screamed out. "Get the fucker!" The force of the words twisted her face.

I turned back. Spark was frozen on the spot. His mouth was open. JB's face was screwed into a confused frown. Sal was rooted to the spot. The police were four shops away. Three. Wasn't time meant to slow down at times like this? Freeze to give you enough time to think, to figure out an answer? Well it didn't.

Two shops away. "Run!" I screeched at Spark.

He snapped his head towards me.

“Go on!” I shouted. I crossed in front of him. Between him and the police. His weight shifted. It seemed to take forever. They were almost on top of us.

Then his foot corkscrewed into the pavement and pushed off and he ran.

I skipped to the side.

Both policemen careered straight into me.

I was on the ground with all the breath knocked out of me. I pushed up on my hands to stand. Spark was dashing straight for specs guy. He was almost on top of him. Steele ran forward. Spark was just feet away when he spotted her coming for him. He turned on the spot and headed sideways.

I was on my feet.

The police were on the floor.

JB landed a toecap in each of their kidneys.

Spark was darting for a side street.

Blood was pumping so hard in my ears I never heard the car.

But I heard the smack slice through the air.

And saw what there was of his emaciated body flop to the street like a rag.

I ran. He was lying there, face up. I knew he was high but his eyes were as big and black as vats of tar. A small drop of dark blood was crawling from one nostril. His face was slack. Not the loose-muscled relief of heroin. Not the temporary painlessness of sleep.

He was dead.

Gone.

And now everything did go into slow motion. My whole world ground down to freeze frame.

I buried my face into his chest. There was no movement at all. It just lay there, bony and empty, the organs that had pumped blood and breath and poison round his body swilling around like meat.

Somewhere deep inside me tears were trying to form. Tears and screams and questions, clawing and climbing to get out. But my body wasn't ready to let them come.

I looked up and the street seemed still, but it wasn't, it was just that my head was racing so fast. Steele was turning to specs guy. He was shaking his head and shrugging, his face expressionless behind the glasses. There was a force on my shoulder. Gripping me like a crusher. Police, I thought, and squirmed against the hold, which tightened.

"Shh," came a familiar sound. Sal. I stopped struggling. She put the other hand on me.

A droplet emerged from the corner of my eye.

"Come with me," she said. So gently. Like a blanket around me. I turned round. She looked right through my eyes, down to the dark pit inside me. Her eyes were so full of sadness and warmth and love. I could feel her pulling the

tears from me. A second drop rolled onto my cheek. And a third.

Over her shoulder I saw Steele sliding into the crowd. I turned, blinking back the tears, to see the policemen starting to rise from the ground, and turned back. Specs guy was still just standing there. Sal followed my gaze to him. I felt her lips give me a gentle, motherly kiss on my forehead and then her hands relaxed their grip, just a tiny amount.

I crumpled to the floor.

“Come with me,” she said for a second time, softly. “Now,” she added sharply. She placed her palm between my shoulder blades pushed me forward. I still wasn’t thinking. I just went where she pushed. I turned and caught one last glimpse of Spark’s still body before it was surrounded and hidden from me first by a gathering crowd and then by my tears. I couldn’t see. I just stumbled forward letting Sal’s hand guide me. Until a door slammed behind me and cloth surrounded me and coffee was pressed under my nose.

I felt liquid in my throat, but I couldn’t connect it with the coffee I found myself holding. It was like I was inside some kind of bubble and everything else was outside, somewhere I could see but only like I could see what was on a TV screen. I was in a room with people but I had no idea who they were. It was like I was watching strangers playing out a scene, only I was at the heart of the scene and the things they were saying

were just strings of words, only at regular points those words were peppered with what I recognised as my name.

I heard words. They were being repeated, over and over. I looked at the faces around me but their lips weren't moving. "I can't see him," I heard and then I realised that "him" was Spark, and the words were coming from me.

And it was true. I couldn't see him. His beautiful hair, his pained eyes, his broken body. It was like he was someone I'd heard stories about from friends but never met. Only he hadn't just been part of my life, he had *been* my life. And there should have been years of memories flooding my head and my heart, but instead there was just a nauseating emptiness where they should have been.

I felt more liquid warming my throat, and the room started to come back into focus like my ears had popped. My senses had returned. There was suddenly a strong bitter taste of coffee in my mouth and I half-choked.

"Hey, you're back," said Sal.

"I can't see him," I said.

"You will."

"I want to go back. I have to see him." My body was starting to shake. The room seemed to be closing in on me. I had to get out. I had to see Spark. One more time. Just one.

I jumped to my feet. Before I could move Shell was on me, holding me in place.

I lashed an arm out. Sal caught it and pinned it to my side.

“You can’t,” said Shell.

“But he’s out there,” I said. “I have to see him. I have to say goodbye.”

“He’s gone,” she said. “They’ll have taken him long since.”

“I’ve got to get out of here,” I screamed.

“And go where?” said Sal.

“I don’t know.” And I didn’t. I had no idea, and I’d lost the only person I could ask.

“This is your home,” said Sal.

I’d thought she was right. I’d thought I’d found home. Only it wasn’t my home, it was our home, and now there was no us.

“Nowhere’s home without him,” I said.

Shell loosened her grip. She held my head gently into her. She was about twice the size of me. I collapsed into the warmth and let the tears come. And all at once with the tears the memories came rushing back. Every single one.

I was drowning in them. It was like someone had put white hot metal in my eyeball and started twisting, and the pain was getting stronger and stronger. Only if the pain was in my flesh my body would have shut down to protect me by now. I would have passed out long since.

“Why can’t I sleep?” I sobbed into Shell’s shoulder. I felt her sigh and her embrace close slightly around me.

I pulled myself away and looked up at her. “What’s wrong with me?” I asked.

“You hurt,” she said.

Fourteen

Shell looked nervous, like there was something she wasn't saying. Since I'd met them all, I'd got this sense that sometimes there were things they weren't telling me, subjects they were shying away from. Well that was fine, but this wasn't the time for secrets and half truths. The love of my life was dead and I needed them to be here for me. One hundred percent. Or I needed them to get out.

“You hurt,” she said again. “And you're angry.”

Too right I was angry. I was angry with her because she was hiding something from me. And I wanted to lash out, but that was only because she was there in front of me. I was angry for three years of life that Tyler Cross and Miss Steele and every other dick at Black Lane High had taken away from us. I was angry for the thirteen years before he met me that had driven Spark to heroin and self-harm. And I was angry for every second we would never spend together.

By now my body was shaking uncontrollably with all the rage trying to get out. I flung Shell's hands from my shoulders. “So what's the answer?” I screamed. “To kick someone's head in?”

She didn't rise to it. I wanted her to. I wanted her to fight back so I could get rid of the hate boiling away inside me. But she just stood there. JB was leaning against the wall playing

with his guitar, and Sal was lying on the throws as though nothing had happened.

Sal. I remembered. When I'd been straining to get away she'd loosened her grip. She'd let me go. She knew what I wanted to do and instead of stopping me she'd unleashed me like some attack dog. I looked at her and I looked back at Sal, and I looked at JB leaning back without a care in the world and I felt like I'd landed in some freakshow film set in the backwoods of the American South.

And then I saw what was propped up against the wall next to JB. A gun. Some kind of rifle, only shorter. I guess it was what people mean when they talk about a sawn-off shotgun. There was a flimsy cardboard box next to it, about the same size as a sandwich wrapper from Pret a Manger. The lid was open and I could see cartridges. It was lying on top of another gun. A smaller one, little bigger than a pencil case.

Shell followed my eyes. She took a pace back.

“What the hell is this?” I asked.

“This is your home,” said Shell. “And we're your family.”

“And we always will be,” said Sal.

JB looked up from his guitar. I half expected him to start playing the blues, or open his mouth to reveal a chicken bone he'd been chewing on for days.

“My family? What do you know about my family?”

“Enough,” said Sal, and she shrugged, as though she’d given it her best shot and she had no idea what to do next.

I had no idea what to do next but for the second time in two days I knew I had to leave. I had to leave and not look back and wherever I ended up I had to figure out what to do when I got there. I sized the three of them up, trying to calculate whether I could make a run for it. They were looking at me as though they were wondering what came next as well.

My survival autopilot kicked in. I turned and walked what I hoped calm as anything to our room. At least, what had been our room, our home, for a few brief hours. I went in, picked the bag up, and walked back out. I walked towards the door. No one made a move.

I made the choice in an instant, without a clue why.

I changed direction, ever so slightly. Still no one moved. I steered myself towards JB. I was almost arm’s reach from him. He just sat there, picking at his guitar.

I picked up the guns and the cartridges, stowed them in my bag, buffered by wads of notes, and headed towards the door. As I turned the handle I heard Sal’s voice repeat, “We always will be.”

I closed the door behind me. I’d heard that before. I’d said forever to Spark and he’d said it back to me. It hadn’t done either of us any

good then, and it wasn't going to do me any good now.

Outside it was already getting light. There was no sign of what had happened the previous night. People were starting to emerge onto the streets, buying early morning milk or walking the dog before work. Doing the things they did every morning, as though Spark had never been there.

I looked around. Tension was taking hold of my body. I felt like the bag was transparent and everyone was staring at the gun. I imagined Miss Steele and the police and specs guy watching from behind windows and round corners.

I had no idea where I was going when I began to walk but as the sun started to take a hold and the streets started to fill it was like I was drawn by invisible elastic. I didn't want to take the tube or the train. Too many barriers, too much security, too many police and cameras. So I walked. South, towards the centre of the city, till I found myself at Euston Station and turned west along the Euston Road.

The air was beginning to warm and it was turning into a beautiful early summer day, but a cold grey dampness was creeping through my body. I was returning to the numbness I'd felt the previous night, like I was going into some kind of delayed shock. I felt like I was sleepwalking through a world that was awake. Maybe that's how I'd always felt, only before I'd had Spark to share it with.

Occasionally my mind went back to the *Forgotten and Alone Club*, to the sound of JB's band, to Sal and Shell laughing over cans of Relentless, to tearing up the streets of Camden tagging every wall we saw like we didn't have a care. There'd been a whole group of us sharing this dream-world and for a few hours it had been a glorious home. Now it was a prison, and I was sentenced to a life of solitary.

Soon I was at the corner of Baker Street and Marylebone Road. My legs stopped by the coach stop and ten minutes or so later I was reaching in my bag for a twenty. I asked the driver for a single and found a seat near the back of the coach. I pressed my face to the window and London scrolled past me in the early morning sun, and then semi-green fields and High Wycombe, and the giant chalk cutting through the Chilterns and soon there were houses again. Oxford houses. I was heading back to places I'd sworn I'd never see again. Like my life was rewinding and unravelling.

It was an hour's walk from the coach stop the other end to Black Lane High and by then everyone was in class already.

I guess I should remember the next few minutes as distilled rage, as being possessed by some force outside myself, as plugging myself into the memory of Shell snuffing out the breath of her past, as an act of frenzied love or desperate revenge.

It was none of those. I remember every detail, but only like I remember a video I've seen lots of times or a building I pass every day or the cover of the magazine that's been in the doctor's waiting room for years. They are just events. Moments in time not even joined together, just preserved like single frames in a photo album. Loading the gun. Where did I learn to load a gun? A corridor. A classroom door. Faces. Familiar faces. Faces from other memories that weren't good. The sound of gunfire. Silence. Bodies falling. Faces twisted. Reloading. The sound of screaming. The corridor. More classrooms. More faces. More bullets. More silence. More screaming.

A final face. Miss Steele. A face filled with surprise. Filled with hate. Twisted. Pointing. Her face the previous night. More surprise. Another gunshot. A face expressionless. A body sliding. Lying. Like Spark.

And then clarity. Children running and screaming all around me, and a human face lifeless and open-eyed, eyes pointing up in what would have been an accusing stare, only there was no soul left to accuse. And I thought of all the other eyes in all the other classrooms and above the screaming of the children and the screaming in my head from the bodies with no breath left to shout their accusations I heard my own hushed voice endlessly repeating the same word. "Spark," I was saying. Again and again. It grew from a breath to a word to a cry, and I knew

I could shriek as loud as a human being ever could and I could walk to the edge of the world crying out his name but he would never respond. Not once. Not with so much as a near silent whisper.

The gun slipped from my hand and I took the pistol from my bag and I closed my eyes and screamed his name one final time, and before I could even hear the bang, nothing.

Fifteen

“Shhh.”

Darkness. In the darkness a familiar noise.

“Ssshhhhhhh.”

“Spark?”

“Shhh.” Not Spark. A woman’s voice. A smell I recognised. Warm wool and cigarettes. The smell of home.

“Sal?”

“Welcome back.”

I tried to open my eyes. They were glued together. I tried to feel for my hand, to rub them clear. I couldn’t tell where my arm was, where my muscles were, like my body had gone.

My body *had* gone. I remembered. Remembered Spark lying dead. Remembered going into school. Remembered putting a gun to my head.

“Let me,” said Sal’s voice. I felt warm wet cloth on my face, around my eyes, gently cleaning my lids. “There,” she said.

I tried again and my eyes opened and there was Sal’s face, looking down at me.

“Am I dead?” I asked.

She smiled. “Yes. You’re dead.”

“Then where am I?”

“You’ll be back home with us very soon,” she said. “But first you need to be here.”

“Where’s here?”

“Take a look,” she said.

I began to feel the muscles in other parts of my body. I could move my neck. I looked

around and saw that I was outside. There was a hint of sun in the sky and a light wind. It was evening. There were trees. I felt Sal pulling me upwards, helping my legs, which were beginning to work.

Soon I was standing. Sal's arm was around my shoulder. We were in an open space somewhere. I looked around. Gravestones. We were in a cemetery.

She held me tighter.

We were standing by a grave. There was a headstone. It had a date. The day Spark died. And a name. Jack Hunt.

“Spark!”

My legs crumpled. Sal caught me. Held me so I was kneeling, my eyes level with the letters that formed his name. I reached out to touch. Even in the sun the stone felt so cold. I ran my fingertips along the letters of his name.

As I withdrew my hand I felt something cold and slick on my palm.

“You might want this,” said a man's voice. I turned and saw JB. He gave me the briefest of smiles before pointing to what he'd put in my hand. It was a can of paint. I shook it, took off the lid and shakily formed the outline of a flame on the stone.

I stood up to look at it. It had nothing of the lightness or flow of Spark's tags. But it said what I wanted it to say. It said “Who the fuck is Jack Hunt? This is Spark's place.”

My eyes flicked to the side. There was another stone next to his. It looked new as well. Sal gripped my shoulders tightly. I read the name on the stone. Kayla Flame.

For a second time my legs went from beneath me. For a second time Sal caught me.

“It’s OK,” she said.

“It’s my grave,” I said. The words made no sense. Only. I was dead. This was my grave. They made no sense and yet they made complete sense.

And then I read the date. And I looked at Spark’s grave, and then I looked back, and suddenly none of it made any sense at all. The date on my gravestone said I’d died two days before him.

“What?”

“Roll up your sleeves,” said Sal.

“What?”

“Roll up your sleeves.”

I pulled at one cuff of my hoodie, then the other till they were round my elbows.

“And?” I said.

“And look,” she said.

“And look at what?” I asked, staring at my pale white forearms.

Silence. I knew something was odd but I couldn’t work out what it was, and then it clicked. “My tattoo!”

“It’s faded completely now,” said Sal. “It would have been gone by the end of the next day.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You still don’t get it? Why do you think we tried to stop you getting it done? Because we knew it would go. Because we knew you’d want to know why. Because there was no way you were ready to know. Not then. But I guess now you’re ready, and even if you’re not there’s no point trying to hide it.”

“When I was with you I could feel it sometimes. I could feel you were hiding something. And there were times I’d catch you staring at me and I could see this look, like pity.”

Sal sat down beside me on the grass and took my hands. She looked me straight in the eyes and said, “You didn’t die in school, Kayla. You didn’t die when you pulled the trigger. You died the night they attacked you. You died on the towpath. Spark tried to resuscitate you for half an hour but there was nothing anyone could do.”

“And you knew? You knew as soon as you saw me?”

Sal let go my hands. She reached into her pocket and produced a lighter. She held it under the palm of her hand and sparked it. The flame swallowed her skin and she didn’t flinch. Her eyes didn’t blink. She left it there for at least a minute and calmly put it back into her pocket. She held her palm out. It wasn’t burnt. Just red, a red that was fading before my eyes.

“You?”

“Me,” she said. “Me, and Shell, and JB, and Garrett, and Jimmy Juju.”

My head started to spin. The noise of all the questions was so loud I put my hands to my ears but the noise got louder and louder and I started pounding at the sides of my head. I opened my palms and cradled my head like the madman in *The Scream*. I could feel a hollow under my skin. I pulled my hand away.

“That’ll take a while,” said Sal.

From the cacophony in my head there was only one question that made its way to my lips. I held myself still, and made myself breathe slow and stared at Sal and said, “So why isn’t Spark here?”

“Spark’s dead.”

“I’m dead. And I’m here. So why isn’t he here?”

“Because that’s not how it works,” she said. I could see a tear starting to form in her eye, like the tear a mother should cry the first time her child gets hurt. “I’m sorry.”

“So how does it work?”

“I don’t know how it works. None of us does. All we know is this. Each one of us lost someone. Someone we loved more than life itself. Someone we tried to save but couldn’t.”

I felt a heat inside me. Anger, sadness, pity, determination, all set light together in a single fire, a fire in the place my heart should be. Our fire. His and mine. A fire that wouldn’t be put out. I took Sal’s hands and held them as softly but as firmly as she had held mine and I said, slowly and calmly,

“Fuck ‘that’s not how it works’. That’s exactly how it works. And if it’s not then I’m not going to stop until I make it work like that.”